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WEIRD TALES CLUB . . 3

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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, $1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 41, No. 5

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Come and Go Mad

I

HE HAD known it, somehow, when he had awakened that morning. He knew it more surely now, staring out of the editorial room window into the early afternoon sunlight slanting down among the buildings to cast a pattern of light and shadow. He knew that soon, perhaps even today, something important was going to happen. Whether good or bad he did not know, but he darkly suspected. And with reason; there are few good things that may unexpectedly happen to a man, things, that is, of lasting importance. Disaster can strike from innumerable directions, in amazingly diverse ways.

A voice said, "Hey, Mr. Vine," and he turned away from the window, slowly. That in itself was strange for it was not his manner to move slowly; he was a small, volatile man, almost cat-like in the quickness of his reactions and his movements.

But this time something made him turn slowly from the window, almost as though he never again expected to see that chiaroscuro of an early afternoon.

He said, "Hi, Red."

The freckled copy boy said, "His Nibs wants to see ya."

"Now?"

"Naw. Atcher convenience. Sometime next week, maybe. If yer busy, give him an apperntment."

He put his fist against Red's chin and shoved, and the copy boy staggered back in assumed distress.

He got up out of his chair and went over to the water cooler. He pressed his thumb on the button and water gurgled into the paper cup.

Harry Wheeler sauntered over and said, "Hiya, Nappy. What's up? Going on the carpet?"

He said, "Sure, for a raise."

He drank and crumpled the cup, tossing it into the waste basket. He went over to the door marked Private and went through it.

Walter J. Candler, the managing editor, looked up from the work on his desk and said affably, "Sit down, Vine. Be with you in a moment," and then looked down again.

He slid into the chair opposite Candler, worried a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and lighted it. He studied the back of the sheet of paper of which the managing editor was reading the front. There wasn't anything on the back of it.

The M. E. put the paper down and looked at him. "Vine, I've got a screwy one. You're good on screwy ones."

He grinned slowly at the M. E. He said, "If that's a compliment, thanks."

"It's a compliment, all right. You've done some pretty tough things for us. This one's different. I've never yet asked a reporter to do anything I wouldn't do myself. *I* wouldn't do this; so I'm not asking you to."

The M. E. picked up the paper he'd been reading and then put it down again without even looking at it. "Ever hear of Ellsworth Joyce Randolph?"

"Head of the asylum? Hell yes, I've met him. Casually."

"How'd he impress you?"

HE WAS aware that the managing editor was staring at him intently, that it wasn't too casual a question. He parried. "What do you mean? In what way? You mean is he a good Joe, is he a good poli-

Heading by Boris Dolgov

The recurring memory of things which could not have happened. . . .

By Fredric Brown

tician, has he got a good bedside manner for a psychiatrist, or what?"

"I mean, how sane do you think he is?"

He looked at Candler and Candler wasn't kidding. Candler was strictly deadpan.

He began to laugh, and then he stopped laughing. He leaned forward across Candler's desk. "Ellsworth Joyce Randolph," he said. "You're talking about Ellsworth Joyce Randolph?"

Candler nodded. "Dr. Randolph was in here this morning. He told a rather strange story. He didn't want me to print it. He did want me to check on it, to send our best man to check on it. He said if we found it was true we could print it in hundred and twenty line type in red ink." Candler grinned wryly. "We could, at that."

HE STUMPED out his cigarette and studied Candler's face. "But the story itself is so screwy you're not sure whether Dr. Randolph himself might be insane?"

"Exactly."

"And what's tough about the assignment?"

"The doc says a reporter could get the story only from the inside."

"You mean, go in as a guard or something?"

Candler said, "Something."

"Oh."

He got up out of the chair and walked over to the window, stood with his back to the managing editor, looking out. The sun had moved hardly at all. Yet the shadow pattern in the streets looked different, obscurely different. The shadow pattern inside himself was different, too. This, he knew, was what had been going to happen. He turned around. He said, "No. Hell no."

Candler shrugged imperceptibly. "Don't blame you. I haven't even asked you to. I wouldn't do it myself."

He asked, "What does Ellsworth Joyce Randolph think is going on inside his nuthouse? It must be something pretty screwy if it made you wonder whether Randolph himself is sane."

"I can't tell you that, Vine. Promised him I wouldn't, whether or not you took the assignment."

"You mean—even if I took the job I still wouldn't know what I was looking for?"

"That's right. You'd be prejudiced. You wouldn't be objective. You'd be looking for something, and you might think you found it whether it was there or not. Or you might be so prejudiced against finding it that you'd refuse to recognize it if it bit you in the leg."

He strode from the window over to the desk and banged his fist down on it.

He said, "God damn it, Candler, why *me?* You know what happened to me three years ago."

"Sure. Amnesia."

"Sure, amnesia. Just like that. But I haven't kept it any secret that I never got *over* that amnesia. I'm thirty years old—or am I? My memory goes back three years. Do you know what it feels like to have a blank wall in your memory only three years back?

"Oh, sure, I know what's on the other side of that wall. I know because everybody tells me. I know I started here as a copy boy ten years ago. I know where I was born and when and I know my parents are both dead. I know what they look like—because I've seen their pictures. I know I didn't have a wife and kids, because everybody who knew me told me I didn't. Get that part—everybody who knew me, not everybody I knew. I didn't know anybody.

"Sure, I've done all right since then. After I got out of the hospital—and I don't even remember the accident that put me there—I did all right back here because I still knew how to write news stories, even though I had to learn everybody's name all over again. I wasn't any worse off than a new reporter starting cold on a paper in a strange city. And everybody was as helpful as hell."

Candler raised a placating hand to stem the tide. He said, "Okay, Nappy. You said no, and that's enough. I don't see what all that's got to do with this story, but all you had to do was say no. So forget about it."

The tenseness hadn't gone out of him. He said, "You don't see what *that's* got to do with the story? You ask—or, all right, you don't ask, you suggest—that I get myself certified as a madman, go into an asylum

as a patient. When—how much confidence does anyone have in his own mind when he can't remember going to school, can't remember the first time he met any of the people he works with every day, can't remember starting on the job he works at, can't remember—anything back of three years before?"

Abruptly he struck the desk again with his fist, and then looked foolish about it. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get wound up about it like that."

Candler said, "Sit down."

"The answer's still no."

"Sit down, anyway."

He sat down and fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket, got it lighted.

Candler said, "I didn't even mean to mention it, but I've got to now. Now that you talked that way. I didn't know you felt like that about your amnesia. I thought that was water under the bridge.

"Listen, when Dr. Randolph asked me what reporter we had that could best cover it, I told him about you. What your background was. He remembered meeting you, too, incidentally. But he hadn't known you'd had amnesia."

"Is that why you suggested me?"

"Skip that till I make my point. He said that while you were there, he'd be glad to try one of the newer, milder forms of shock treatment on you, and that it might restore your lost memories. He said it would be worth trying."

"He didn't say it would work."

"He said it might; that it wouldn't do any harm."

HE STUBBED out the cigarette from which he'd taken only three drags. He glared at Candler. He didn't have to say what was in his mind; the managing editor could read it.

Candler said, "Calm down, boy. Remember I didn't bring it up until you yourself started in on how much that memory-wall bothered you. I wasn't saving it for ammunition. I mentioned it only out of fairness to you, after the way you talked."

"Fairness!"

Candler shrugged. "You said no. I accepted it. Then you started raving at me and put me in a spot where I had to mention something I'd hardly thought of at the time. Forget it. How's that graft story coming? Any new leads?"

"You going to put someone else on the asylum story?"

"No. You're the logical one for it."

"What *is* the story? It must be pretty woolly if it makes you wonder if Dr. Randolph is sane. Does he think his patients ought to trade places with his doctors, or what?"

He laughed. "Sure, you can't tell me. That's really beautiful double bait. Curiosity—and hope of knocking down that wall. So what's the rest of it? If I say yes instead of no, how long will I be there, under what circumstances? What chance have I got of getting out again? How do I get in?"

Candler said slowly, "Vine, I'm not sure any more I want you to try it. Let's skip the whole thing."

"Let's not. Not until you answer my questions, anyway."

"All right. You'd go in anonymously, so there wouldn't be any stigma attached if the story wouldn't work out. If it does, you can tell the whole truth—including Dr. Randolph's collusion in getting you in and out again. The cat will be out of the bag, then.

"You might get what you want in a few days—and you wouldn't stay on it more than a couple of weeks in any case."

"How many at the asylum would know who I was and what I was there for, besides Randolph?"

"No one." Candler leaned forward and held up four fingers of his left hand. He pointed to the first. "Four people would have to be in on it. You." He pointed to one finger. "Me." A second. "Dr. Randolph." The third finger. "And one other reporter from here."

"Not that I'd object, but why the other reporter?"

"Intermediary. In two ways. First, he'll go with you to some psychiatrist; Randolph will recommend one you can fool comparatively easily. He'll be your brother and request that you be examined and certified. You convince the psychiatrist you're nuts and he'll certify you. Of course it takes two

doctors to put you away, but Randolph will be the second. Your alleged brother will want Randolph for the second one."

"All this under an assumed name?"

"If you prefer. Of course there's no real reason why it should be."

"That's the way I feel about it. Keep it out of the papers, of course. Tell everybody around here—except my—hey, in that case we couldn't make up a brother. But Charlie Doerr, in Circulation, is my first cousin and my nearest living relative. He'd do, wouldn't he?"

"Sure. And he'd have to be intermediary the rest of the way, then. Visit you at the asylum and bring back anything you have to send back."

"And if, in a couple of weeks, I've found nothing, you'll spring me?"

Candler nodded. "I'll pass the word to Randolph; he'll interview you and pronounce you cured, and you're out. You come back here, and you've been on vacation. That's all."

"What kind of insanity should I pretend to have?"

He thought Candler squirmed a little in his chair. Candler said, "Well—wouldn't this Nappy business be a natural? I mean, paranoia is a form of insanity which, Dr. Randolph told me, hasn't any physical symptoms. It's just a delusion supported by a systematic framework of rationalization. A paranoiac can be sane in every way except one."

He watched Candler and there was a faint twisted grin on his lips. "You mean I should think I'm Napoleon?"

Candler gestured slightly. "Choose your own delusion. But—isn't that one a natural? I mean, the boys around the office always kidding you and calling you Nappy. And—" He finished weakly, "—and everything."

And then Candler looked at him squarely. "Want to do it?"

He stood up. "I think so. I'll let you know for sure tomorrow morning after I've slept on it, but unofficially—yes. Is that good enough?"

Candler nodded.

He said, "I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off; I'm going to the library to read up on paranoia. Haven't anything else to do anyway. And I'll talk to Charlie Doerr this evening. Okay?"

"Fine. Thanks."

He grinned at Candler. He leaned across the desk. He said, "I'll let you in on a little secret, now that things have gone this far. Don't tell anyone. I *am* Napoleon!"

It was a good exit line, so he went out.

II

HE GOT his hat and coat and went outside, out of the air-conditioning and into the hot sunlight. Out of the quiet madhouse of a newspaper office after deadline, into the quieter madhouse of the streets on a sultry July afternoon.

He tilted his panama back on his head and ran his handkerchief across his forehead. Where was he going? Not to the library to bone up on paranoia; that had been a gag to get off for the rest of the afternoon. He'd read everything the library had on paranoia—and on allied subjects—over two years ago. He was an expert on it. He could fool any psychiatrist in the country into thinking that he was sane—or that he wasn't.

He walked north to the park and sat down on one of the benches in the shade. He put his hat on the bench beside him and mopped his forehead again.

He stared out at the grass, bright green in the sunlight, at the pigeons with their silly head-bobbing method of walking, at a red squirrel that came down one side of a tree, looked about him and scurried up the other side of the same tree.

And he thought back to the wall of amnesia of three years ago.

The wall that hadn't been a wall at all. The phrase intrigued him: a wall at all. Pigeons on the grass, alas. A wall at all.

It wasn't a wall at all; it was a shift, an abrupt change. A line had been drawn between two lives. Twenty-seven years of a life before the accident. Three years of a life since the accident.

They were not the same life.

But no one knew. Until this afternoon he had never even hinted the truth—if it *was* the truth—to anyone. He'd used it as an exit line in leaving Candler's office,

knowing Candler would take it as a gag. Even so, one had to be careful; use a gag-line like that often, and people begin to wonder.

The fact that his extensive injuries from that accident had included a broken jaw was probably responsible for the fact that today he was free and not in an insane asylum. That broken jaw—it had been in a cast when he'd returned to consciousness forty-eight hours after his car had run head-on into a truck ten miles out of town—had prevented him from talking for three weeks.

And by the end of three weeks, despite the pain and the confusion that had filled them, he'd had a chance to think things over. He'd invented the wall. The amnesia, the convenient amnesia that was so much more believable than the truth as he knew it.

But *was* the truth as he knew it?

That was the haunting ghost that had ridden him for three years now, since the very hour when he had awakened to whiteness in a white room and a stranger, strangely dressed, had been sitting beside a bed the like of which had been in no field hospital he'd ever heard of or seen. A bed with an overhead framework. And when he looked from the stranger's face down at his own body, he saw that one of his legs and both of his arms were in casts and that the cast of the leg stuck upward at an angle, a rope running over a pulley holding it so.

He'd tried to open his mouth to ask where he was, what had happened to him, and that was when he had discovered the cast on his jaw.

He'd stared at the stranger, hoping the latter would have sense enough to volunteer the information and the stranger had grinned at him and said, "Hi, George. Back with us, huh? You'll be all right."

And there was something strange about the language—until he placed what it was. English. Was he in the hands of the English? And it was a language, too, which he knew little of, yet he understood the stranger perfectly. And why did the stranger call him George?

Maybe some of the doubt, some of the the fierce bewilderment, showed in his eyes, for the stranger leaned closer to the bed. He said, "Maybe you're still confused, George. You were in a pretty bad smashup. You ran that coupe of yours head-on into a gravel truck. That was two days ago, and you're just coming out of it for the first time. You're all right, but you'll be in the hospital for a while, till all the bones you busted knit. Nothing seriously wrong with you."

And then waves of pain had come and swept away the confusion, and he had closed his eyes.

Another voice in the room said, "We're going to give you a hypo, Mr. Vine," but he hadn't dared open his eyes again. It was easier to fight the pain without seeing.

There had been the prick of a needle in his upper arm. And pretty soon there'd been nothingness.

WHEN he came back again—twelve hours later, he learned afterwards—it had been to the same white room, the same strange bed, but this time there was a woman in the room, a woman in a strange white costume standing at the foot of the bed studying a paper that was fastened to a piece of board.

She had smiled at him when she saw that his eyes were open. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Vine. Hope you're feeling better. I'll tell Dr. Holt that you're back with us."

She went away and came back with a man who was also strangely dressed, in roughly the same fashion as had been the stranger who had called him George.

The doctor looked at him and chuckled. "Got a patient, for once, who can't talk back to me. Or even write notes." Then his face sobered. "Are you in pain, though? Blink once if you're not, twice if you are."

The pain wasn't really very bad this time, and he blinked once. The doctor nodded with satisfaction. "That cousin of yours," he said, "has kept calling up. He'll be glad to know you're going to be back in shape to—well, to listen if not to talk. Guess it won't hurt you to see him a while this evening."

The nurse rearranged his bedclothing and then, mercifully, both she and the doctor had gone, leaving him alone to straighten out his chaotic thoughts.

Straighten them out? That had been three

years ago, and he hadn't been able to straighten them out yet:

The startling fact that they'd spoken English and that he'd understood that barbaric tongue perfectly, despite his slight previous knowledge of it. How could an accident have made him suddenly fluent in a language which he had known but slightly?

The startling fact that they'd called him by a different name. "George" had been the name used by the man who'd been beside his bed last night. "Mr. Vine," the nurse had called him. George Vine, an English name, surely.

But there was one thing a thousand times more startling than either of those: It was what last night's stranger (Could he be the "cousin" of whom the doctor had spoken?) had told him about the accident. "You ran that coupe of yours head-on into a gravel truck."

The amazing thing, the contradictory thing, was that he *knew* what a coupe was and what a truck was. Not that he had any recollection of having driven either, of the accident itself, or of anything beyond that moment when he'd been sitting in the tent after Lodi—but—but how could a picture of a coupe, something driven by a gasoline engine, arise to his mind when such a concept had never been *in* his mind before.

There was that mad mingling of two worlds—the one sharp and clear and definite. The world he'd lived his twenty-seven years of life in, in the world into which he'd been born twenty-seven years ago, on August 15th, 1769, in Corsica. The world in which he'd gone to sleep—it seemed like last night—in his tent at Lodi, as General of the Army in Italy, after his first important victory in the field.

And then there was this disturbing world into which he had awakened, this white world in which people spoke an English—now that he thought of it—which was different from the English he had heard spoken at Brienne, in Valence, at Toulon, and yet which he understood perfectly, which he knew instinctively that he could speak if his jaw were not in a cast. This world in which people called him George Vine, and in which, strangest of all, people used words that he did not know, could not conceivably know, and yet which brought pictures to his mind.

Coupe, truck. They were both forms of—the word came to his mind unbidden—automobiles. He concentrated on what an automobile was and how it worked, and the information was there. The cylinder block, the pistons driven by explosions of gasoline vapor, ignited by a spark of electricity from a generator—

Electricity. He opened his eyes and looked upward at the shaded light in the ceiling, and he knew, somehow, that it was an *electric* light, and in a general way he knew what electricity was.

The Italian Galvani—yes, he'd read of some experiments of Galvani, but they hadn't encompassed anything practical such as a light like that. And staring at the shaded light, he visualized behind it water power running dynamos, miles of wire, motors running generators. He caught his breath at the concept that came to him out of his own mind, or part of his own mind.

The faint, fumbling experiments of Galvani with their weak currents and kicking frogs' legs had scarcely foreshadowed the unmysterious mystery of that light up in the ceiling; and that was the strangest thing yet; part of his mind found it mysterious and another part took it for granted and understood in a general sort of way how it all worked.

Let's see, he thought, the electric light was invented by Thomas Alva Edison somewhere around—Ridiculous; he'd been going to say around 1900, and it was now only 1796!

And then the really horrible thing came to him and he tried—painfully, in vain—to sit up in bed. It *had* been 1900, his memory told him, and Edison had died in 1931—And a man named Napoleon Bonaparte had died a hundred and ten years before that, in 1821.

He'd nearly gone insane then.

And, sane or insane, only the fact that he could not speak had kept him out of a madhouse; it gave him time to think things out; time to realize that his only chance lay in pretending amnesia, in pretending that he remembered nothing of life prior to the accident. They don't put you in a mad-

house for amnesia. They tell you who you are, let you go back to what they tell you your former life was. They let you pick up the threads and weave them, while you try to remember.

Three years ago he'd done that. Now, tomorrow, he was going to a psychiatrist and say that he was—Napoleon!

III

THE slant of the sun was greater. Overhead a big bird of a plane droned by and he looked up at it and began laughing, quietly to himself—not the laughter of madness. True laughter because it sprang from the conception of Napoleon Bonaparte riding in a plane like that and from the overwhelming incongruity of that idea.

It came to him then that he'd never ridden in a plane, that he remembered. Maybe George Vine had; at some time in the twenty-seven years of life George Vine had spent, he must have. But did that mean that *he* had ridden in one? That was a question that was part of the big question.

He got up and started to walk again. It was almost five o'clock; pretty soon Charlie Doerr would be leaving the paper and going home for dinner. Maybe he'd better phone Charlie and be sure he'd be home this evening.

He headed for the nearest bar and phoned; he got Charlie just in time. He said, "This is George. Going to be home this evening?"

"Sure, George. I was going to a poker game, but I called it off when I learned you'd be around."

"When you learned—Oh, Candler talked to you?"

"Yeah. Say, I didn't know you'd phone me or I'd have called Marge, but how about coming out for dinner? It'll be all right with her; I'll call her now if you can."

He said, "Thanks, no, Charlie. Got a dinner date. And say, about that card game; you can go. I can get there about seven and we won't have to talk all evening; an hour'll be enough. You wouldn't be leaving before eight anyway."

Charlie said, "Don't worry about it; I don't much want to go anyway, and you haven't been out for a while. So I'll see you at seven, then."

From the phone booth, he walked over to the bar and ordered a beer. He wondered why he'd turned down the invitation to dinner; probably because, subconsciously, he wanted another couple of hours by himself before he talked to anyone, even Charlie and Marge.

He sipped his beer slowly, because he wanted to make it last; he had to stay sober tonight, plenty sober. There was still time to change his mind; he'd left himself a loophole, however small. He could still go to Candler in the morning and say he'd decided not to do it.

Over the rim of his glass he stared at himself in the back-bar mirror. Small, sandy-haired, with freckles on his nose, stocky. The small and stocky part fitted all right; but the rest of it! Not the remotest resemblance.

He drank another beer slowly, and that made it half past five.

He wandered out again and walked, this time toward town. He walked past the *Blade* and looked up to the third floor and at the window he'd been looking out of when Candler had sent for him. He wondered if he'd ever sit by that window again and look out across a sunlit afternoon.

Maybe. Maybe not.

He thought about Clare. Did he want to see her tonight?

Well, no, to be honest about it, he didn't. But if he disappeared for two weeks or so without having even said good-bye to her, then he'd have to write her off his books; she wouldn't like that.

He'd better.

He stopped in at a drug store and called her home. He said, "This is George, Clare. Listen, I'm being sent out of town tomorrow on an assignment; don't know how long I'll be gone. One of those things that might be a few days or a few weeks. But could I see you late this evening, to say so-long?"

"Why sure, George. What time?"

"It might be after nine, but not much after. That be okay? I'm seeing Charlie first, on business; may not be able to get away before nine."

"Of course, George. Any time."

HE STOPPED in at a hamburger stand, although he wasn't hungry, and managed to eat a sandwich and a piece of pie. That made it a quarter after six and, if he walked, he'd get to Charlie's at just about the right time. So he walked.

Charlie met him at the door. With finger on his lips, he jerked his head backward toward the kitchen where Marge was wiping dishes. He whispered, "I didn't tell Marge, George. It'd worry her."

He wanted to ask Charlie why it would, or should, worry Marge, but he didn't. Maybe he was a little afraid of the answer. It would have to mean that Marge was worrying about him already, and that was a bad sign. He thought he'd been carrying everything off pretty well for three years now.

Anyway, he couldn't ask because Charlie was leading him into the living room and the kitchen was within easy earshot, and Charlie was saying, "Glad you decided you'd like a game of chess, George. Marge is going out tonight; movie she wants to see down at the neighborhood show. I was going to that card game out of self-defense, but I didn't want to."

He got the chessboard and men out of the closet and started to set up a game on the coffee table.

Marge came in with a try bearing tall cold glasses of beer and put it down beside the chessboard. She said, "Hi, George. Hear you're going away a couple of weeks."

He nodded. "But I don't know where. Candler—the managing editor—asked me if I'd be free for an out of town assignment and I said sure, and he said he'd tell me about it tomorrow."

Charlie was holding out clenched hands, a pawn in each, and he touched Charlie's left hand and got white. He moved pawn to king's fourth and, when Charlie did the same, advanced his queen's pawn.

Marge was fussing with her hat in front of the mirror. She said, "If you're not here when I get back, George, so long and good luck."

He said, "Thanks, Marge. 'Bye."

He made a few more moves before Marge came over, ready to go, kissed Charlie goodbye and then kissed him lightly on the forehead. She said, "Take care of yourself, George."

For a moment his eyes met her pale blue ones and he thought, she *is* worrying about me. It scared him a little.

After the door had closed behind her, he said, "Let's not finish the game, Charlie. Let's get to the brass tacks, because I've got to see Clare about nine. Dunno how long I'll be gone, so I can't very well not say good-bye to her."

Charlie looked up at him. "You and Clare serious, George?"

"I don't know."

Charlie picked up his beer and took a sip. Suddenly his voice was brisk and business-like. He said, "All right, let's sit on the brass tacks. We've got an appointment for eleven o'clock tomorrow morning with a guy named Irving, Dr. J. E. Irving, in the Appleton Block. He's a psychiatrist; Dr. Randolph recommended him.

"I called him up this afternoon after Candler had talked to me; Candler had already phoned Randolph. My story was this: I gave my right name. I've got a cousin who's been acting queer lately and whom I wanted him to talk to. I didn't give the cousin's name. I didn't tell him in what way you'd been acting queer; I ducked the question and said I'd rather have him judge for himself without prejudice. I said I'd talked you into talking to a psychiatrist and that the only one I knew of was Randolph; that I'd called Randolph who said he didn't do much private practice and recommended Irving. I told him I was your nearest living relative.

"That leaves the way open to Randolph for the second name on the certificate. If you can talk Irving into thinking you're really insane and he wants to sign you up, I can insist on having Randolph, whom I wanted in the first place. And this time, of course, Randolph will agree."

"You didn't say a thing about what kind of insanity you suspected me of having?"

Charlie shook his head. He said, "So, anyway, neither of us goes to work at the *Blade* tomorrow. I'll leave home the usual time so Marge won't know anything, but I'll

meet you downtown—say, in the lobby of the Christina—at a quarter of eleven. And if you can convince Irving that you're committable—if that's the word—we'll get Randolph right away and get the whole thing settled tomorrow."

"And if I change my mind?"

"Then I'll call the appointment off. That's all. Look, isn't that all there is to talk over? Let's play this game of chess out; it's only twenty after seven."

He shook his head. "I'd rather talk, Charlie. One thing you forgot to cover, anyway. After tomorrow: How often you coming to see me to pick up bulletins for Candler?"

"Oh, sure, I forgot that. As often as visiting hours will permit—three times a week. Monday, Wednesday, Friday afternoons. Tomorrow's Friday, so if you get in, the first time I'll be able to see you is Monday."

"Okay. Say, Charlie, did Candler even hint to you at what the story is that I'm supposed to get in there?"

Charlie Doerr shook his head slowly. "Not a word. What is it? Or is it too secret for you to talk about?"

He stared at Charlie, wondering. And suddenly he felt that he couldn't tell the truth; that he didn't know either. It would make him look too silly. It hadn't sounded so foolish when Candler had given the reason—*a* reason, anyway—for not telling him, but it would sound foolish now.

He said, "If he didn't tell you, I guess I'd better not either, Charlie." And since that didn't sound too convincing, he added, "I promised Candler I wouldn't."

Both glasses of beer were empty by then, and Charlie took them into the kitchen for refilling.

HE FOLLOWED Charlie, somehow preferring the informality of the kitchen. He sat a-straddle on a kitchen chair, leaning his elbows on the back of it, and Charlie leaned against the refrigerator.

Charlie said, "Prosit!" and they drank, and then Charlie asked, "Have you got your story ready for Doc Irving?"

He nodded. "Did Candler tell you what I'm to tell him?"

"You mean, that you're Napoleon?" Charlie chuckled. Did that chuckle quite ring true? He looked at Charlie, and he knew that what he was thinking was completely incredible. Charlie was square and honest as they came. Charlie and Marge were his best friends; they'd been his best friends for three years that he knew of. Longer than that, a hell of a lot longer, according to Charlie. But beyond those three years—that was something else again.

He cleared his throat because the words were going to stick a little. But he had to ask, he had to be sure. "Charlie, I'm going to ask you a hell of a question. Is this business on the up and up?"

"Huh?"

"It's a hell of a thing to ask. But—look, you and Candler don't think I'm crazy, do you? You didn't work this out between you to get me put away—or anyway examined—painlessly, without my knowing it was happening, till too late, did you?"

Charlie was staring at him. He said, "Jeez, George, you don't think I'd do a thing like that, do you?"

"No, I don't. But—you could think it was for my own good, and you might on that basis. Look, Charlie, if it *is* that, if you *think* that, let me point out that this isn't fair. I'm going up against a psychiatrist tomorrow to lie to him, to try to convince him that I have delusions. Not to be honest with him. And that would be unfair as hell, to me. You see that, don't you, Charlie?"

Charlie's face got a little white. He said slowly, "Before God, George, it's nothing like that. All I know about this is what Candler and you have told me.

"You think I'm sane, fully sane?"

Charlie licked his lips. He said, "You want it straight?"

"Yes."

"I never doubted it, until this moment. Unless—well, amnesia is a form of mental aberration, I suppose, and you've never got over that, but that isn't what you mean, is it?"

"No."

"Then, until right now—George, that sounds like a persecution complex, if you really meant what you asked me. A conspiracy to get you to— Surely you can see

how ridiculous it is. What possible reason would either Candler or I have to get you to lie yourself into being committed?"

He said, "I'm sorry, Charlie. It was just a screwy momentary notion. No, I don't think that, of course." He glanced at his wrist watch. "Let's finish that chess game, huh?"

"Fine. Wait till I give us a refill to take along."

HE PLAYED carelessly and managed to lose within fifteen minutes. He turned down Charlie's offer of a chance for revenge and leaned back in his chair.

He said, "Charlie, ever hear of chessmen coming in red and black?"

"N-no. Either black and white, or red and white, any I've ever seen. Why?"

"Well—" He grinned. "I suppose I oughtn't to tell you this after just making you wonder whether I'm really sane after all, but I've been having recurrent dreams recently. No crazier than ordinary dreams except that I've been dreaming the same things over and over. One of them is something about a game between the red and the black; I don't even know whether it's chess. You know how it is when you dream; things seem to make sense whether they do or not. In the dream, I don't wonder whether the red-and-black business is chess or not; I know, I guess, or seem to know. But the knowledge doesn't carry over. You know what I mean?"

"Sure. Go on."

"Well, Charlie, I've been wondering if it just might have something to do with the other side of that wall of amnesia I've never been able to cross. This is the first time in my—well, not in my life, maybe, but in the three years I remember of it, that I've had recurrent dreams. I wonder if—if my memory may not be trying to get through.

"Did I ever have a set of red and black chessman, for instance? Or, in any school I went to, did they have intramural basketball or baseball between red teams and black teams, or—or anything like that?"

Charlie thought for a long moment before he shook his head. "No," he said, "nothing like that. Of course there's red and black in roulette—rouge et noir. And it's the two colors in a deck of playing cards."

"No, I'm pretty sure it doesn't tie in with cards or roulette. It's not—not like that. It's a game *between* the red and the black. They're the players, somehow. Think hard, Charlie; not about where you might have run into that idea, but where *I* might have."

He watched Charlie struggle and after a while he said, "Okay, don't sprain your brain, Charlie. Try this one. *The brightly shining.*"

"The brightly shining what?"

"Just that phrase, *the brightly shining.* Does it mean anything to you, at all?"

"No."

"Okay," he said. "Forget it.

IV

HE WAS early and he walked past Clare's house, as far as the corner and stood under the big elm there, smoking the rest of his cigarette, thinking bleakly.

There wasn't anything to thing about, really; all he had to do was say good-bye to her. Two easy syllables. And stall off her questions as to where he was going, exactly how long he'd be gone. Be quiet and casual and unemotional about it, just as though they didn't mean anything in particular to each other.

It *had* to be that way. He'd known Clare Wilson a year and a half now, and he'd kept her dangling that long; it wasn't fair. This had to be the end, for her sake. He had about as much business asking a woman to marry him as—as a madman who thinks he's Napoleon!

He dropped his cigarette and ground it viciously into the walk with his heel, then went back to the house, up on the porch, and rang the bell.

Clare herself came to the door. The light from the hallway behind her made her hair a circlet of spun gold around her shadowed face.

He wanted to take her into his arms so badly that he clenched his fists with the effort it took to keep his arms down.

Stupidly, he said, "Hi, Clare. How's everything?"

"I don't know, George. How *is* everything? Aren't you coming in?"

She'd stepped back from the doorway to let him past and the light was on her face now, sweetly grave. She knew something was up, he thought; her expression and the tone of her voice gave that away.

He didn't want to go in. He said, "It's such a beautiful night, Clare. Let's take a stroll."

"All right, George." She came out onto the porch. "It is a fine night, such beautiful stars." She turned and looked at him. "Is one of them yours?"

He started a little. Then he stepped forward and took her elbow, guiding her down the porch steps. He said lightly, "All of them are mine. Want to buy any?"

"You wouldn't *give* me one? Just a teeny little dwarf star, maybe? Even one that I'd have to use a telescope to see?"

THEY were out on the sidewalk then, out of hearing of the house, and abruptly her voice changed, the playful note dropped from it, and she asked another question, "What's wrong, George?"

He opened his mouth to say nothing was wrong, and then closed it again. There wasn't any lie that he could tell her, and he couldn't tell her the truth, either. Her asking of that question, in that way, should have made things easier; it made them more difficult.

She asked another, "You mean to say good-bye for—for good, don't you, George?"

He said, "Yes," and his mouth was very dry. He didn't know whether it came out as an articulate monosyllable or not, and he wetted his lips and tried again. He said, "Yes, I'm afraid so, Clare."

"Why?"

He couldn't make himself turn to look at her, he stared blindly ahead. He said, "I—I can't tell you, Clare. But it's the only thing I can do. It's best for both of us."

"Tell me one thing, George. Are you really going away? Or was that just—an excuse?"

"It's true. I'm going away; I don't know for how long. But don't ask me where, please. I can't tell you that."

"Maybe I can tell you, George. Do you mind if I do?"

He minded all right; he minded terribly. But how could he say so? He didn't say anything, because he couldn't say yes, either.

They were beside the park now, the little neighborhood park that was only a block square and didn't offer much in the way of privacy, but which did have benches. And he steered her—or she steered him; he didn't know which—into the park and they sat down on a bench. There were other people in the park, but not too near. Still he hadn't answered her question.

She sat very close to him on the bench. She said, "You've been worried about your mind, haven't you George?"

"Well—yes, in a way, yes, I have."

"And you're going away has something to do with that, hasn't it? You're going somewhere for observation or treatment, or both?"

"Something like that. It's not as simple as that, Clare, and I—I just can't tell you about it."

She put her hand on his hand, lying on his knee. She said, "I knew it was something like that, George. And I don't ask you to tell me anything about it.

"Just—just don't say what you meant to say. Say so-long instead of good-bye. Don't even write me, if you don't want to. But don't be noble and call everything off here and now, for my sake. At least wait until you've been wherever you're going. Will you?"

HE gulped. She made it sound so simple when actually it was so complicated. Miserably he said, "All right, Clare. If you want it that way."

Abruptly she stood up. "Let's get back, George."

He stood beside her. "But it's early."

"I know, but sometimes— Well, there's a psychological moment to end a date, George. I know that sounds silly, but after what we've said, wouldn't it be—uh—anti-climactic—to—"

He laughed a little. He said, "I see what you mean."

They walked back to her home in silence. He didn't know whether it was happy

or unhappy silence; he was too mixed up for that.

On the shadowed porch, in front of the door, she turned and faced him. "George," she said. Silence.

"Oh, damn you, George; quit being so *noble* or whatever you're being. Unless, of course, you *don't* love me. Unless this is just an elaborate form of—of runaround you're giving me. Is it?"

There were only two things he could do. One was run like hell. The other was what he did. He put his arms around her and kissed her. Hungrily.

When that was over, and it wasn't over too quickly, he was breathing a little hard and not thinking too clearly, for he was saying what he hadn't meant to say at all, "I love you, Clare. I love you; I love you."

And she said, "I love you, too, dear. You'll come back to me, won't you?" And he said, "Yes. *Yes.*"

It was four miles or so from her home to his rooming house, but he walked, and the walk seemed to take only seconds.

He sat at the window of his room, with the light out, thinking, but the thoughts went in the same old circles they'd gone in for three years.

No new factor had been added except that now he was going to stick his neck out, way out, miles out. Maybe, just maybe, this thing was going to be settled one way or the other.

Out there, out his window, the stars were bright diamonds in the sky. Was one of them his star of destiny? If so, he was going to follow it, follow it even into the madhouse if it led there. Inside him was a deeply rooted conviction that this wasn't accident, that it wasn't coincidence that had led to his being asked to tell the truth under guise of falsehood.

His star of destiny.

Brightly shining? No, the phrase from his dreams did not refer to that; it was not an adjective phrase, but a noun. *The brightly shining?* What was *the brightly shining?*

And the red and the black? He'd thought of everything Charlie had suggested, and other things, too. Checkers, for instance. But it was not that.

The red and the black.

Well, whatever the answer was, he was running full-speed toward it now, not away from it.

After a while he went to bed, but it was a long time before he went to sleep.

V

CHARLIE DOERR came out of the inner office marked Private and put his hand out. He said, "Good luck, George. The doc's ready to talk to you now."

He shook Charlie's hand and said, "You might as well run along. I'll see you Monday, first visiting day."

"I'll wait here," Charlie said. "I took the day off work anyway, remember? Besides, maybe you won't have to go."

He dropped Charlie's hand, and stared into Charlie's face. He said slowly, "What do you mean, Charlie—maybe I won't have to go."

"Why—" Charlie looked puzzled. "Why, maybe he'll tell you you're all right, or just suggest regular visits to see him until you're straightened out, or—" Charlie finished weakly, "—or something."

Unbelievingly, he stared at Charlie. He wanted to ask, am I crazy or are you, but that sounded crazy to ask under the circumstances. But he had to be sure, sure that Charlie just hadn't let something slip from his mind; maybe he'd fallen into the role he was supposed to be playing when he talked to the doctor just now. He asked, "Charlie, don't you remember that—" And even of that question the rest seemed insane for him to be asking, with Charlie staring blankly at him. The answer was in Charlie's face; it didn't have to be brought to Charlie's lips.

Charlie said again, "I'll wait, of course. Good luck, George."

He looked into Charlie's eyes and nodded, then turned and went through the door marked Private. He closed it behind him, meanwhile studying the man who had been sitting behind the desk and who had risen as he entered. A big man, broad shouldered, iron gray hair.

"Dr. Irving?"

"Yes, Mr. Vine. Will you be seated, please?"

He slid into the comfortable, padded armchair across the desk from the doctor.

"Mr. Vine," said the doctor, "a first interview of this sort is always a bit difficult. For the patient, I mean. Until you know me better, it will be difficult for you to overcome a certain natural reticence in discussing yourself. Would you prefer to talk, to tell things your own way, or would you rather I asked questions?"

He thought that over. He'd had a story ready, but those few words with Charlie in the waiting room had changed everything.

He said, "Perhaps you'd better ask questions."

"Very well." There was a pencil in Dr. Irving's hand and paper on the desk before him. "Where and when were you born?"

He took a deep breath. "To the best of my knowledge, in Corsica on August 15th, 1769. I don't actually remember being born, of course. I do remember things from my boyhood on Corsica, though. We stayed there until I was ten, and after that I was sent to school at Brienne."

Instead of writing, the doctor was tapping the paper lightly with the tip of the pencil. He asked, "What month and year is this?"

"August, 1947. Yes, I know that should make me a hundred and seventy-some years old. You want to know how I account for that. I don't. Nor do I account for the fact that Napoleon Bonaparte died in 1821."

He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms, staring up at the ceiling. "I don't attempt to account for the paradoxes or the discrepancies. I recognize them as such. But according to my own memory, and aside from logic pro or con, I was Napoleon for twenty-seven years. I won't recount what happened during that time; it's all down in the history books.

"But in 1796, after the battle of Lodi, while I was in charge of the armies in Italy, I went to sleep. As far as I knew, just as anyone goes to sleep anywhere, any time. But I woke up—with no sense whatever of duration, by the way—in a hospital in town here, and I was informed that my name was George Vine, that the year was 1944, and that I was twenty-seven years old.

"The twenty-seven years old part checked, and that was all. Absolutely all. I have no recollections of any parts of George Vine's life, prior to his—my—waking up in the hospital after the accident. I know quite a bit about his early life now, but only because I've been told.

"I know when and where he was born, where he went to school, and when he started work at the *Blade*. I know when he enlisted in the army and when he was discharged—late in 1943—because I developed a trick knee after a leg injury. Not in combat, incidentally, and there wasn't any 'psycho-neurotic' on my—his—discharge."

The doctor quit doodling with the pencil. He asked, "You've felt this way for three years—and kept it a secret?"

"Yes. I had time to think things over after the accident, and yes, I decided then to accept what they told me about my identity. They'd have locked me up, of course. Incidentally, I've *tried* to figure out an answer. I've studied Dunne's theory of time—even Charles Fort!" He grinned suddenly. "Ever read about Casper Hauser?"

Dr. Irving nodded.

"Maybe he was playing smart the way I did. And I wonder how many other amnesiacs pretended they didn't know what happened prior to a certain date—rather than admit they had memories at obvious variance with the facts."

DR. IRVING said slowly, "Your cousin informs me that you were a bit—ah—'hipped' was his word—on the subject of Napoleon before your accident. How do you account for that?"

"I've told you I don't account for any of it. But I can verify that fact, aside from what Charlie Doerr says about it. Apparently I—the George Vine I, if I was ever George Vine—was quite interested in Napoleon, had read about him, made a hero of him, and had talked about him quite a bit. Enough so that the fellows he worked with at the *Blade* had nicknamed him 'Nappy.'"

"I notice you distinguish between yourself and George Vine. Are you or are you not he?"

"I have been for three years. Before that—I have no recollection of being George Vine. I don't think I was. I think—as

nearly as I think anything—that *I*, three years ago, woke up in George Vine's body."

"Having done what for a hundred and seventy some years?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Incidentally, I don't doubt that this *is* George Vine's body, and with it I inherited his knowledge—except his personal memories. For example, I knew how to handle his job at the newspaper, although I didn't remember any of the people I worked with there. I have his knowledge of English, for instance, and his ability to write. I knew how to operate a typewriter. My handwriting is the same as his."

"If you think that you are not Vine, how do you account for that?"

He leaned forward. "I think part of me *is* George Vine, and part of me isn't. I think some transference has happened which is outside the run of ordinary human experience. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's supernatural—nor that I'm insane. *Does it?*"

Dr. Irving didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "You kept this secret for three years, for understandable reasons. Now, presumably for other reasons, you decide to tell. What are the other reasons? What has happened to change your attitude?"

It was the question that had been bothering him.

He said slowly, "Because I don't believe in coincidence. Because something in the situation itself has changed. Because I'm tired of pretending. Because I'm willing to risk imprisonment as a paranoic to find out the truth."

"What in the situation has changed?"

"Yesterday it was suggested—by my employer—that I feign insanity for a practical reason. And the very kind of insanity which I have, if any. Surely, I will admit the possibility that I'm insane. But I can only operate on the theory that I'm not. You know that you're Dr. Willard E. Irving; you can only operate on that theory—but how do you *know* you are? Maybe you're insane, but you can only act as though you're not."

"You think your employer is part of a plot—ah—against you? You think there is a conspiracy to get you into a sanitarium?"

"I don't know. Here's what has happened since yesterday noon." He took a deep breath. Then he plunged. He told Dr. Irving the whole story of his interview with Candler, what Candler had said about Dr. Randolph, about his talk with Charlie Doerr last night and about Charlie's bewildering about-face in the waiting room.

When he was through he said, "That's all." He looked at Dr. Irving's expressionless face with more curiosity than concern, trying to read it. He added, quite casually, "You don't believe me, of course. You think I'm insane."

HE MET Irving's eyes squarely. He said, "You have no choice—unless you would choose to believe I'm telling you an elaborate set of lies to convince you I'm insane. I mean, as a scientist and as a psychiatrist, you cannot even admit the possibility that the things I believe—*know*—are objectively true. Am I not right?"

"I fear that you are. So?"

"So go ahead and sign your commitment. I'm going to follow this thing through. Even to the detail of having Dr. Ellsworth Joyce Randolph sign the second one."

"You make no objection?"

"Would it do any good if I did?"

"On one point, yes, Mr. Vine. If a patient has a prejudice against—or a delusion concerning—one psychiatrist, it is best not to have him under that particular psychiatrist's care. If you think Dr. Randolph is concerned in a plot against you, I would suggest that another one be named."

He said softly, "Even if I choose Randolph?"

Dr. Irving waved a deprecating hand, "Of course, if both you and Mr. Doerr prefer—"

"We prefer."

The iron gray head nodded gravely. "Of course you understand one thing; if Dr. Randolph and I decide you should go to the sanitarium, it will not be for custodial care. It will be for your recovery through treatment."

He nodded.

Dr. Irving stood. "You'll pardon me a moment? I'll phone Dr. Randolph."

He watched Dr. Irving go through a door to an inner room. He thought; there's a

phone on his desk right there; but he doesn't want me to overhear the conversation.

He sat there very quietly until Irving came back and said, "Dr. Randolph is free. And I phoned for a cab to take us there. You'll pardon me again? I'd like to speak to your cousin, Mr. Doerr."

He sat there and didn't watch the doctor leave in the opposite direction for the waiting room. He could have gone to the door and tried to catch words in the low-voiced conversation, but he didn't. He just sat there until he heard the waiting room door open behind him and Charlie's voice said, "Come on, George. The cab will be waiting downstairs by now."

They went down in the elevator and the cab was there. Dr. Irving gave the address.

In the cab, about half way there, he said, "It's a beautiful day," and Charlie cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, it is." The rest of the way he didn't try it again and nobody said anything.

VI

HE WORE gray trousers and a gray shirt, open at the collar and with no necktie that he might decide to hang himself with. No belt, either, for the same reason, although the trousers buttoned snugly enough around the waist that there was no danger of them falling off. Just as there was no danger of his falling out any of the windows; they were barred.

He was not in a cell, however; it was a large ward on the third floor. There were seven other men in the ward. His eyes ran over them. Two were playing checkers, sitting on the floor with the board on the floor between them. One sat in a chair, staring fixedly at nothing; two leaned against the bars of one of the open windows, looking out and talking casually and sanely. One read a magazine. One sat in a corner, playing smooth arpeggios on a piano that wasn't there at all.

He stood leaning against the wall, watching the other seven. He'd been here two hours now; it seemed like two years.

The interview with Dr. Ellsworth Joyce Randolph had gone smoothly; it had been practically a duplicate of his interview with Irving. And quite obviously, Dr. Randolph had never heard of him before.

He'd expected that, of course.

He felt very calm, now. For a while, he'd decided, he wasn't going to think, wasn't going to worry, wasn't even going to feel.

He strolled over and stood watching the checker game.

It was a sane checker game; the rules were being followed.

One of the men looked up and asked, "What's your name?" It was a perfectly sane question; the only thing wrong with it was that the same man had asked the same question four times now within the two hours he'd been here.

He said, "George Vine."

"Mine's Bassington, Ray Bassington. Call me Ray. Are you insane?"

"No."

"Some of us are and some of us aren't. He is." He looked at the man who was playing the imaginary piano. "Do you play checkers?"

"Not very well."

"Good. We eat pretty soon now. Anything you want to know, just ask me."

"How do you get out of here? Wait, I don't mean that for a gag, or anything. Seriously, what's the procedure?"

"You go in front of the board once a month. They ask you questions and decide if you go or stay. Sometimes they stick needles in you. What you down for?"

"Down for? What do you mean?"

"Feeble-minded, manic-depressive, dementia praecox, involutional melancholia—"

"Oh. Paranoia, I guess."

"That's bad. Then they stick needles in you."

A bell rang somewhere.

"That's dinner," said the other checker player. "Ever try to commit suicide? Or kill anyone?"

"No."

"They'll let you eat at an A table then, with knife and fork."

The door of the ward was being opened. It opened outward and a guard stood outside and said, "All right." They filed out,

all except the man who was sitting in the chair staring into space.

"How about him?" he asked Ray Bassington.

"He'll miss a meal tonight. Manic-depressive, just going into the depressive stage. They let you miss one meal; if you're not able to go to the next they take you and feed you. You a manic-depressive?"

"No."

"You're lucky. It's hell when you're on the down-swing. Here, through this door."

It was a big room. Tables and benches were crowded with men in gray shirts and gray trousers, like his. A guard grabbed his arm as he went through the doorway and said, "There. That seat."

It was right beside the door. There was a tin plate, messy with food, and a spoon beside it. He asked, "Don't I get a knife and fork? I was told—"

The guard gave him a shove toward the seat. "Observation period, seven days. Nobody gets silverware till their observation period's over. Siddown."

HE SAT down. No one at his table had silverware. All the others were eating, several of them noisily and messily. He kept his eyes on his own plate, unappetizing as that was. He toyed with his spoon and managed to eat a few pieces of potato out of the stew and one or two of the chunks of meat that were mostly lean.

The coffee was in a tin cup and he wondered why until he realized how breakable an ordinary cup would be and how lethal could be one of the heavy mugs cheap restaurants use.

The coffee was weak and cool; he couldn't drink it.

He sat back and closed his eyes. When he opened them again there was an empty plate and an empty cup in front of him and the man at his left was eating very rapidly. It was the man who'd been playing the non-existent piano.

He thought, if I'm here long enough, I'll get hungry enough to eat that stuff. He didn't like the thought of being there that long.

After a while a bell rang and they got up, one table at a time on signals he didn't catch, and filed out. His group had come in last; it went out first.

Ray Bassington was behind him on the stairs. He said, "You'll get used to it. What'd you say your name is?"

"George Vine."

Bassington laughed. The door shut on them from the outside.

He saw it was dark outside. He went over to one of the windows and stared out through the bars. There was a single bright star that showed just above the top of the elm tree in the yard. *His* star? Well, he'd followed it here. A cloud drifted across it.

Someone was standing beside him. He turned his head and saw it was the man who'd been playing piano. He had a dark, foreign-looking face with intense black eyes; just then he was smiling, as though at a secret joke.

"You're new here, aren't you? Or just get put in this ward, which?"

"New. George Vine's the name."

"Baroni. Musician. Used to be, anyway. Now—let it go. Anything you want to know about the place?"

"Sure. How to get out of it."

Baroni laughed, without particular amusement but not bitterly either. "First, convince them you're all right again. Mind telling what's wrong with you—or don't you want to talk about it? Some of us mind, others don't."

He looked at Baroni, wondering which way he felt. Finally he said, "I guess I don't mind. I—think I'm Napoleon."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"*Are* you Napoleon? If you aren't, that's one thing. Then maybe you'll get out of here in six months or so. If you really *are*—that's bad. You'll probably die here."

"Why? I mean, if I *am*, then I'm sane and—"

"Not the point. Point's whether they think you're sane or not. Way they figure, if you think you're Napoleon you're not sane. Q. E. D. You stay here."

"Even if I tell them I'm convinced I'm George Vine?"

"They've worked with paranoia before. And that's what they've got you down for, count on it. And any time a paranoiac gets tired of a place, he'll try to lie his way out

of it. They weren't born yesterday. They know that."

"In general, yes, but how—"

A sudden cold chill went down his spine. He didn't have to finish the question. *They stick needles in you*— It hadn't meant anything when Ray Bassington had said it.

The dark man nodded. "Truth serum," he said. "When a paranoiac reaches the stage where he's cured *if* he's telling the truth, they make sure he's telling it before they let him go."

He thought, what a beautiful trap it had been that he'd walked into. He'd probably die here, now.

He leaned his head against the cool iron bars and closed his eyes. He heard footsteps walking away from him and knew he was alone.

He opened his eyes and looked out into blackness; now the clouds had drifted across the moon, too.

Clare, he thought; *Clare.*

A trap.

But—if there was a trap, there must be a trapper.

He was sane or he was insane. If he was sane, he'd walked into a trap, and *if there was a trap, there must be a trapper, or trappers.*

If he was insane—

God, let it be that he *was* insane. That way everything made such sweetly simple sense, and someday he might be out of here, he might go back to working for the *Blade,* possibly even with a memory of all the years he'd worked there. Or that George Vine had worked there.

That was the catch. *He* wasn't George Vine.

And there was another catch. He *wasn't* insane.

The cool iron of the bars against his forehead.

AFTER a while he heard the door open and looked around. Two guards had come in. A wild hope, reasonless, surged up inside him. It didn't last.

"Bedtime, you guys," said one of the guards. He looked at the manic-depressive sitting motionless on the chair and said, "Nuts. Hey, Bassington, help me get this guy in."

The other guard, a heavy-set man with hair close-cropped like a wrestler's, came over to the window.

"You. You're the new one in here. Vine, ain't it?"

He nodded.

"Want trouble, or going to be good?" Fingers of the guard's right hand clenched, the fist went back.

"Don't want trouble. Got enough."

The guard relaxed a little. "Okay, stick to that and you'll get along. Vacant bunk's in there." He pointed. "One on the right. Make it up yourself in the morning. Stay in the bunk and mind your own business. If there's any noise or trouble here in the ward, we come in and take care of it. Our own way. You wouldn't like it."

He didn't trust himself to speak, so he just nodded. He turned and went through the door of the cubicle to which the guard had pointed. There were two bunks in there; the manic-depressive who'd been on the chair was lying flat on his back on the other, staring blindly up at the ceiling through wide-open eyes. They'd pulled his slippers off, leaving him otherwise dressed.

He turned to his own bunk, knowing there was nothing on earth he could do for the other man, no way he could reach him through the impenetrable shell of blank misery which is the manic-depressive's intermittent companion.

He turned down a gray sheet-blanket on his own bunk and found under it another gray sheet-blanket atop a hard but smooth pad. He slipped off his shirt and trousers and hung them on a hook on the wall at the foot of his bed. He looked around for a switch to turn off the light overhead and couldn't find one. But, even as he looked, the light went out.

A single light still burned somewhere in the ward room outside, and by it he could see to take his shoes and socks off and get into the bunk.

He lay very quiet for a while, hearing only two sounds, both faint and seeming far away. Somewhere in another cubicle off the ward someone was singing quietly to himself, a wordless monody; somewhere else someone else was sobbing. In his own cubicle, he couldn't hear even the sound of breathing from his room mate.

Then there was a shuffle of bare feet and someone in the open doorway said, "George Vine."

He said, "Yes?"

"Shhh, not so loud. This is Bassington. Want to tell you about that guard; I should have warned you before. Don't ever tangle with him."

"I didn't."

"I heard; you were smart. He'll slug you to pieces if you give him half a chance. He's a sadist. A lot of guards are; that's why they're bughousers; that's what they call themselves, bughousers. If they get fired one place for being too brutal they get on at another one. He'll be in again in the morning; I thought I'd warn you."

The shadow in the doorway was gone.

He lay there in the dimness, the almost-darkness, feeling rather than thinking. Wondering. Did mad people ever know that they were mad? Could they tell? Was every one of them sure, as he was sure—?

That quiet, still thing lying in the bunk near his, inarticulately suffering, withdrawn from human reach into a profound misery beyond the understanding of the sane—

"Napoleon Bonaparte!"

A clear voice, but had it been within his mind, or from without? He sat up on the bunk. His eyes pierced the dimness, could discern no form, no shadow, in the doorway.

He said, "Yes?"

VII

ONLY then, sitting up on the bunk and having answered "Yes," did he realize the name by which the voice had called him.

"Get up. Dress."

He swung his legs out over the edge of the bunk, stood up. He reached for his shirt and was slipping his arms into it before he stopped and asked, "Why?"

"To learn the truth."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Do not speak aloud. I can hear you. I am within you and without. I have no name."

"Then *what* are you?" He said it aloud, without thinking.

"An instrument of The Brightly Shining."

He dropped the trousers he'd been holding. He sat down carefully on the edge of the bunk, leaned over and groped around for them.

His mind groped, too. Groped for he knew not what. Finally he found a question—*the* question. He didn't ask it aloud this time; he thought it, concentrated on it as he straightened out his trousers and thrust his legs in them.

"Am I mad?"

The answer—*No*—came clear and sharp as a spoken word, but had it been spoken? Or was it a sound that was only in his mind?

He found his shoes and pulled them on his feet. As he fumbled the laces into some sort of knots, he thought, "Who—what—is The Brightly Shining?"

"The Brightly Shining is *that which is Earth*. It is the intelligence of our planet. It is one of three intelligences in the solar system, one of many in the universe. Earth is one; it is called The Brightly Shining."

"I do not understand," he thought.

"You will. Are you ready?"

He finished the second knot. He stood up. The voice said, "Come. Walk silently."

It was as though he was being led through the almost-darkness, although he felt no physical touch upon him; he saw no physical presence beside him. But he walked confidently, although quietly on tiptoe, knowing he would not walk into anything nor stumble. Through the big room that was the ward, and then his outstretched hand touched the knob of a door.

He turned it gently and the door opened inward. Light blinded him. The voice said, "Wait," and he stood immobile. He could hear sound—the rustle of paper, the turn of a page—outside the door, in the lighted corridor.

Then from across the hall came the sound of a shrill scream. A chair scraped and feet hit the floor of the corridor, walking away toward the sound of the scream. A door opened and closed.

The voice said, "Come," and he pulled the door open the rest of the way and went outside, past the desk and the empty chair that had been just outside the door of the ward.

Another door, another corridor. The voice said, "Wait," the voice said, "Come"; this

time a guard slept. He tiptoed past. Down steps.

He thought the question, "Where am I going?"

"Mad," said the voice.

"But you said I wasn't—" He'd spoken aloud and the sound startled him almost more than had the answer to his last question. And in the silence that followed the words he'd spoken there came—from the bottom of the stairs and around the corner—the sound of a buzzing switchboard, and someone said, "Yes? . Okay, Doctor, I'll be right up." Footsteps and the closing of an elevator door.

He went down the remaining stairs and around the corner and he was in the front main hall. There was an empty desk with a switchboard beside it. He walked past it and to the front door. It was bolted and he threw the heavy bolt.

He went outside, into the night.

He walked quietly across cement, across gravel; then his shoes were on grass and he didn't have to tiptoe any more. It was as dark now as the inside of an elephant; he felt the presence of trees nearby and leaves brushed his face occasionally, but he walked rapidly, confidently and his hand went forward just in time to touch a brick wall.

He reached up and he could touch the top of it; he pulled himself up and over it. There was broken glass on the flat top of the wall; he cut his clothes and his flesh badly, but he felt no pain, only the wetness of blood and the stickiness of blood.

HE WALKED along a lighted road, he walked along dark and empty streets, he walked down a darker alley. He opened the back gate of a yard and walked to the back door of a house. He opened the door and went in. There was a lighted room at the front of the house; he could see the rectangle of light at the end of a corridor. He went along the corridor and into the lighted room.

Someone who had been seated at a desk stood up. Someone, a man, whose face he knew but whom he could not—

"Yes," said the man, smiling, "you know me, but you do not know me. Your mind is under partial control and your ability to recognize me is blocked out. Other than that and your analgesia—you are covered with blood from the glass on the wall, but you don't feel any pain—your mind is normal and you are sane."

"What's it all about?" he asked. "Why was I brought here?"

"Because you are sane. I'm sorry about that, because you can't be. It is not so much that you retained memory of your previous life, after you'd been moved. That happens. It is that you somehow know something of what you shouldn't—something of The Brightly Shining, and of the Game between the red and the black. For that reason—"

"For that reason, what?" he asked.

The man he knew and did not know smiled gently. "For that reason you must know the rest, so that you will know nothing at all. For everything will add to nothing. The truth will drive you mad."

"That I do not believe."

"Of course you don't. If the truth were conceivable to you, it would not drive you mad. But you cannot remotely conceive the truth."

A powerful anger surged up within him. He stared at the familiar face that he knew and did not know, and he stared down at himself; at the torn and bloody gray uniform, at his torn and bloody hands. The hands hooked like claws with the desire to kill—someone, the someone, whoever it was, who stood before him.

He asked, "What are you?"

"I am an instrument of The Brightly Shining."

"The same which led me here, or another?"

"One is all, all is one. Within the whole and its parts, there is no difference. One instrument is another and the red is the black and the black is the white and there is no difference. The Brightly Shining is the soul of Earth. I use *soul* as the nearest word in your vocabulary."

Hatred was almost a bright light. It was almost something that he could lean into, lean his weight against.

He asked, "What is The Brightly Shining?" He made the words a curse in his mouth.

"Knowing will make you mad. You want to know?"

"Yes." He made a curse out of that simple, sibilant syllable.

The lights were dimming. Or was it his eyes? The room was becoming dimmer, and at the same time receding. It was becoming a tiny cube of dim light, seen from afar and outside, from somewhere in the distant dark, ever receding, turning into a pinpoint of light, and within that point of light ever the hated Thing, the man—or was it a man?—standing beside the desk.

Into darkness, into space, up and apart from the earth—a dim sphere in the night, a receding sphere outlined against the spangled blackness of eternal space, occulting the stars, a disk of black.

It stopped receding, and time stopped. It was as though the clock of the universe stood still. Beside him, out of the void, spoke the voice of the instrument of The Shining One.

"Behold," it said. "The Being of Earth."

He beheld. Not as though an outward change was occurring, but an inward one, as though his senses were being changed to enable him to perceive something hitherto unseeable.

The ball that was Earth began to glow. Brightly to shine.

"You see the intelligence that rules Earth," said the voice. "The sum of the black and the white and the red, that are one, divided only as the lobes of a brain are divided, the trinity that is one."

The glowing ball and the stars behind it faded, and the darkness became deeper darkness and then there was dim light, growing brighter, and he was back in the room with the man standing at the desk.

"You saw," said the man whom he hated. "But you do not understand. You ask, *what* you have seen, *what* is The Brightly Shining? It is a group intelligence, the true intelligence of Earth, one intelligence among three in the Solar system, one among many in the universe.

"What, then, is man? Men are pawns, in games of—to you—unbelievable complexity, between the red and the black, the white and the black, for amusement. Played by one part of an organism against another part, to while away an instant of eternity. There are vaster games, played between galaxies. Not with man.

"Man is a parasite peculiar to Earth, which tolerates his presence for a little while. He exists nowhere else in the cosmos, and he does not exist here for long. A little while, a few chessboard wars, which he thinks he fights himself— You begin to understand."

The man at the desk smiled.

"You want to know of yourself. Nothing is less important. A move was made, before Lodi. The opportunity was there for a move of the red; a stronger, more ruthless personality was needed; it was a turning point in history—which means in the game. Do you understand now? A pinch-hitter was put in to become Emperor."

He managed two words. "And then?"

"The Brightly Shining does not kill. You had to be put somewhere, some time. Long later a man named George Vine was killed in an accident; his body was still usable. George Vine had not been insane, but he had had a Napoleonic complex. The transference was amusing."

"No doubt." Again it was impossible to reach the man at the desk. The hatred itself was a wall between them. "Then George Vine is dead?"

"Yes. And you, because you knew a little too much, must go mad so that you will know nothing. Knowing the truth will drive you mad."

"No!"

The instrument smiled.

VIII

THE room, the cube of light, dimmed; it seemed to tilt. Still standing, he was going over backward, his position becoming horizontal instead of vertical.

His weight was on his back and under him was the soft-hard smoothness of his bunk, the roughness of a gray sheet blanket. And he could move; he sat up.

He had been dreaming? Had he really been outside the asylum? He held up his hands, touched one to the other, and they were wet with something sticky. So was the front of his shirt and the thighs and knees of his trousers.

And his shoes were on.

The blood was there from climbing the wall. And now the analgesia was leaving, and pain was beginning to come into his

hands, his chest, his stomach and his legs. Sharp-biting pain.

He said aloud, *"I am not mad. I am not mad."* Was he screaming it?

A voice said, "No. Not yet." Was it the voice that had been here in the room before? Or was it the voice of the man who had stood in the lighted room? Or had both been the same voice?

It said, "Ask, 'What is man?' "

Mechanically, he asked it.

"Man is a blind alley in evolution, who came too late to compete, who has always been controlled and played with by The Brightly-Shining, which was old and wise before man walked erect.

"Man is a parasite upon a planet populated before he came, populated by a Being that is one and many, a billion cells but a single mind, a single intelligence, a single will—as is true of every other populated planet in the universe.

"Man is a joke, a clown, a parasite. He is nothing; he will be less."

"Come and go mad."

He was getting out of bed again; he was walking. Through the doorway of the cubicle, along the ward. To the door that led to the corridor; a thin crack of light showed under it. But this time his hand did not reach out for the knob. Instead he stood there facing the closed door, and it began to glow; slowly it became light and visible.

As though from somewhere an invisible spotlight played upon it, the door became a visible rectangle in the surrounding blackness; as brightly visible as the crack under it.

The voice said, "You see before you a cell of your ruler, a cell unintelligent in itself, yet a tiny part of a unit which is intelligent, one of a million units which make up *the* intelligence which rules the earth—and you. And which earth-wide intelligence is one of a million intelligences which rule the universe."

"The *door?* I don't—"

The voice spoke no more; it had withdrawn, but somehow inside his mind was the echo of silent laughter.

He leaned closer and saw what he was meant to see. An ant was crawling up the door.

His eyes followed it, and numbing horror crawled apace, up his spine. A hundred things that had been told and shown him suddenly fitted into a pattern, a pattern of sheer horror. The black, the white, the red; the black ants, the white ants, the red ants; the players with men, separate lobes of a single group brain, the intelligence that was one. Man an accident, a parasite, a pawn; a million planets in the universe inhabited each by an insect race that was a single intelligence for the planet—and all the intelligences together were the single cosmic intelligence that was—*God!*

The one-syllable word wouldn't come.

He went mad, instead.

He beat upon the now-dark door with his bloody hands, with his knees, his face, with himself, although already he had forgotten why, had forgotten what he wanted to crush.

He was raving mad—dementia praecox, not paranoia—when they released his body by putting it into a strait jacket, released it from frenzy to quietude.

He was quietly mad—paranoia, not dementia praecox—when they released him as sane eleven months later.

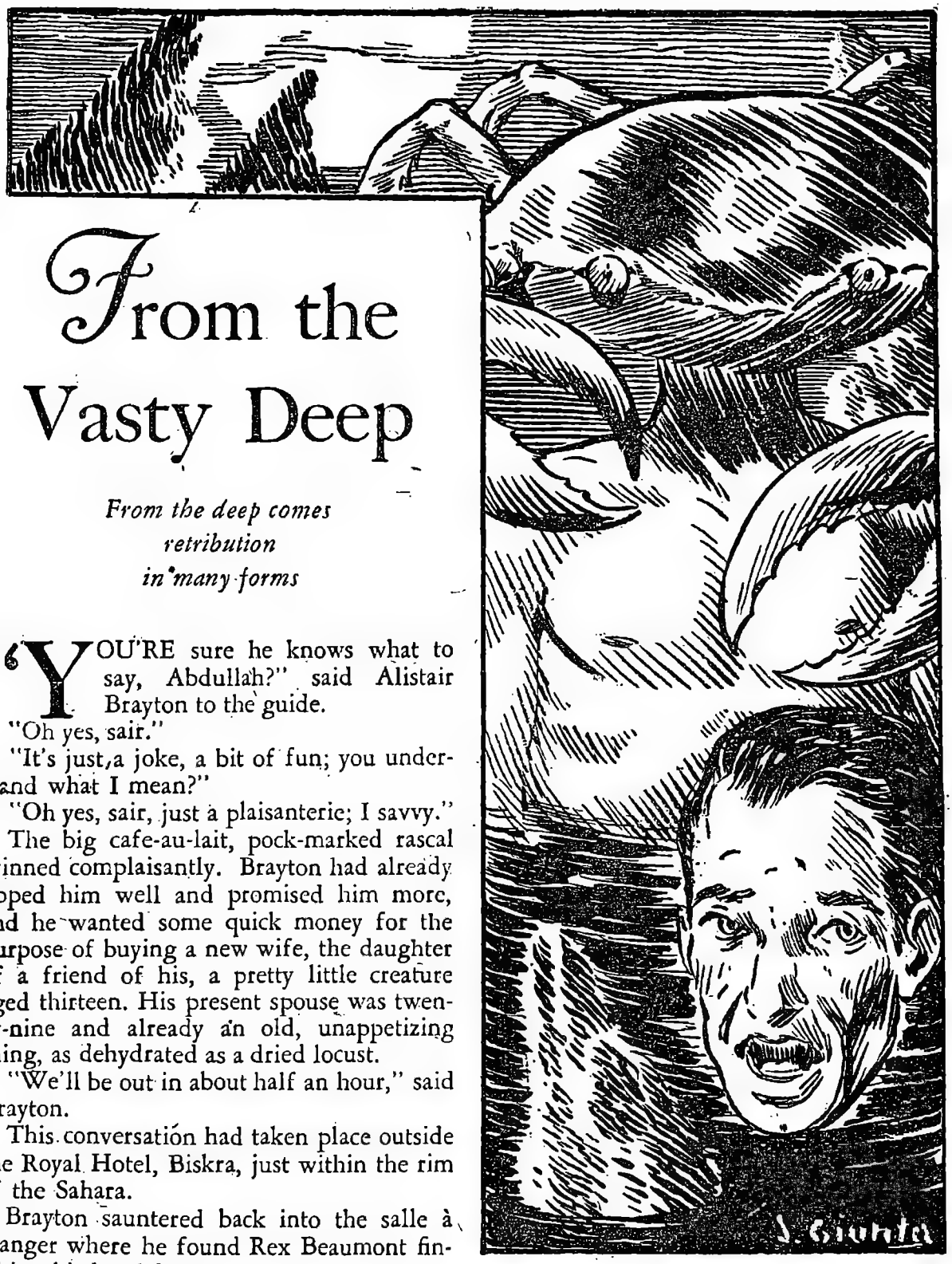
Paranoia, you see, is a peculiar affliction; it has no physical symptoms, it is merely the presence of a fixed delusion. A series of metrazol shocks had cleared up the dementia praecox and left only the fixed delusion that he was George Vine, a reporter.

The asylum authorities thought he was, too, so the delusion was not recognized as such and they released him and gave him a certificate to prove he was sane.

He married Clare; he still works at the *Blade*—for a man named Candler. He still plays chess with his cousin, Charlie Doerr. He still sees—for periodic checkups—both Dr. Irving and Dr. Randolph.

Which of them smiles inwardly? What good would it do you to know? Yes it was, is, one of those four.

It doesn't matter. Don't you understand?: Nothing matters!



From the Vasty Deep

From the deep comes
retribution
in many forms

BY
H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

"YOU'RE sure he knows what to say, Abdullah?" said Alistair Brayton to the guide.

"Oh yes, sair."

"It's just a joke, a bit of fun; you understand what I mean?"

"Oh yes, sair, just a plaisanterie; I savvy."

The big cafe-au-lait, pock-marked rascal grinned complaisantly. Brayton had already tipped him well and promised him more, and he wanted some quick money for the purpose of buying a new wife, the daughter of a friend of his, a pretty little creature aged thirteen. His present spouse was twenty-nine and already an old, unappetizing thing, as dehydrated as a dried locust.

"We'll be out in about half an hour," said Brayton.

This conversation had taken place outside the Royal Hotel, Biskra, just within the rim of the Sahara.

Brayton sauntered back into the salle à manger where he found Rex Beaumont finishing his breakfast.

"Have you eaten?" asked Beaumont.

"Yes, some time ago."

"You were up early!"

"Yes, the sun blazes right into my room."

Their tones were cordial and their mutual antipathy nearly perfectly concealed. That intensely reciprocated dislike was of long standing, perhaps sufficiently explained by

Heading by John Giunta

the fact that they were beyond any argument the two leading actors on the contemporary British stage. In fact Beaumont was probably the best mummer in the world, for he had starred in some very good pictures. Their rivalry was bitterly exacerbated by the ferocious partisanship of their respective cliques. Brayton was thirty-six and Beaumont thirty-nine, and those three cursed years plagued his soul. Forty was *such* a milestone, *mill*stone almost to that cynosure of a myriad female eyes.

He was indeed a very handsome comely fellow, dark, slim, lithe and a beautiful mover on the stage. He possessed "classic" features, an intense, somewhat sinister expression, a powerful and dominating eye, mellifluous voice, and, above all that, he was a most accomplished and versatile craftsman. His Iago, both Richards, Antony, Volpone and Shotover were superb, and he was equally esteemed in modern comedy. But he had found a gray hair six months before; that very morning, in the light of the pitiless desert sun, he had spotted several thriving and minatory colonies, and dyeing was a stark reminder of death.

Brayton was a mighty charmer, too, big, blond, smiling, full of red blood coursing radiantly; equipped with a fine resonant baritone and a marvelous sense of character. He filled a stage and held the eye hypnotically. A superlative Macbeth, Othello, Undershaft, and both Caesars. He almost did the impossible with Falstaff, and, indeed, he never really failed; it was not in his character.

Their rivalry was inept and superfluous, for there was plenty of room for both and they clashed in no way, but there it was, and that is the way of things in that logically lawless profession.

Both were vain men, but Brayton's vanity found expression chiefly in praise of himself, Brayton's in dispraise of others Beaumont was, however, deemed by his colleagues far the better character of the two, a generous and considerate employer, fair-minded, and with a sense of humor sufficiently developed to disinfect and restrain his little failings; and after all, no great actor is ever *quite* human, everyone agreed.

Brayton was generally rated a false bonhomme, catty, uncertain-tempered, inclined to malice and tight in money matters. His nickname in the profession was "Billy Bennett" after a famous comedian whose self-composed description was "almost a gentleman." This judgment was probably a bit harsh and superficial. He was a medium, in a sense only another word for a great character actor—fundamentally a simple, rather impercipient, unanalytic man, with very little personality of his own, being perpetually "possessed" by the "souls" created by others; and, like most mediums, unscrupulous; amoral rather than bad. He did his stuff very well, and his irresistible smile got his fans vapouring with rapture. Neither was married, both preferring a frequent change of leading lady.

A last very important point, Beaumont was now "Sir Rex," having been knighted a few weeks before in the New Year Honours. Brayton had not yet recovered from that fearful right to the solar plexus.

THEIR meeting in Biskra was, of course, accidental; Beaumont, on holiday at Algiers, had decided to have a look at the desert before going home. Brayton had been yachting in the Mediterranean, got bored and seasick and flown down from the Riviera.

The night before they had arranged with the local Sand-Diviner to have their fortunes told by him at ten that morning. Both men were extremely superstitious. Most gamblers share this frailty as a badge of their tribe, and anyone who relies for fame and fortune on the fickle and callous mob—chiefly female mob—is a "plunger" indeed.

Brayton now reminded Beaumont of this date.

"Oh yes," he said, "I haven't forgotten. One of these days, perhaps, I shall cure myself of this puerile craving for the reassurance of magicians; they've had a lot of my money and habitually contradict each other."

"Well, come on," laughed Brayton, "and let us see what this professor of the mantic art has to tell us."

Beaumont put on his hat and followed him out of the hotel to where Abdullah was awaiting them. He salaamed in his oily, yet subtly disrespectful way. They had not far to go, the seer's pitch was only a

hundred yards down the road at the entrance to the little bazaar. As they proceeded, Abdullah kept up a repeated cry of "Imshi" as he shooed away the septic beggars and precociously lewd small boys.

The Sandman was squatting down behind a porphyry bowl three-quarters filled with soiled sand. He was clad in a burnoose over a tiny, grimy pair of linen pants. He looked half as old as time and his face was the color and texture of a swan's paddle, a dark sallow gray etched with a web of tiny lines and wrinkles. He took no notice of them as they halted beside him, nor to some remark of Abdullah's, but continued apparently aimlessly, to stir the sand with a skinny, arid forefinger. This nonchalance was part of his "act," thought Brayton. Abdullah spoke to him again in Arabic and then asked Beaumont to step forward in front of the bowl. For about half a minute the old man went on scrabbling in the sand more slowly now, less aimlessly and seemingly in a more concentrated way. And then presently he mumbled a short sentence. Abdullah spoke to him interrogatively and he replied again.

He seemed out of temper.

"Well?" said Beaumont.

"It is not very good news, I fear," smiled Abdullah.

"Never mind, let's have it," said Beaumont uneasily and with a forced smile.

"He say gentleman have not one year to go."

"To go! Go where?" asked Beaumont sharply.

"He mean to go on living, I think," replied Abdullah smiling and giving Brayton a quick glance.

Beaumont flushed and gave a clipped, uneasy laugh. "That's nice of him," he said. "Is that all he has to tell me?"

"That is all," replied Abdullah.

"Well, its your turn," said Beaumont to Brayton. He was obviously much disconcerted. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead.

Brayton moved forward and took his place before the bowl. Again the old man scrabbled in the sand for a while, and then looked up suddenly and for the first time. There was a look of extreme malevolence in his vulture eyes. Then he spoke a very long sentence. Abdullah looked baffled and the two of them had a short tart colloquy. At length Abdullah shrugged his shoulders and said, "It is difficult to savvy what he say. He say you will meet other gentleman at a feast and then by the sea, and then Allah will be very good to you. I dunno what he mean. He say he finish now."

THE seance was over. Beaumont immediately excused himself and hurried away. Brayton handed Abdullah a roll of notes. "It was just a joke, of course," he said quickly. "I'll tell the other gentleman it was just a joke before he leaves."

Abdullah smiled, salaamed, gave some of the notes to the Sandman, who took them without a word.

"He is angry," said Abdullah, "he does not like doing such things. He believes he see *true* things in the sand."

"Well, tell him it was only a little joke," muttered Brayton, "and that I'll put it right." He walked away leaving them together.

He had, of course, by bribery and corruption deliberately queered the prophetic pitch, moved by one of those sudden, malicious impulses which had contributed so much to his unpopularity. He had just wanted to give that conceited, over-rated person, Beaumont, a bit of a shock, a jolt. Well, he had done that, all right—quite obviously. Now he had better repair the damage. If he could have met him at once he would probably have done so, but he was not to be found till lunch-time, and by then Brayton had had time to think it over. When explained, it would look such a *very* poor joke, one requiring rather a lot of difficult explanation. He knew Beaumont would be furious and certainly spread the story when he got back to London. That would not do him any good. "Just typical of the blighter!" would be the general verdict. Whereas, if he kept his mouth shut, Beaumont would soon forget all about it, of course. No, he felt he just could not bring himself to confess and humiliate himself to such a spoilt, vain, over-rated person as "Sir Rex"; everyone knew how he had worked and wangled for that knighthood! His sense of guilt intensified his hate, so spreading

and thinning his good impulse till it was impotent. No, he would let it go!

There was a famous Parisian nerve specialist staying in the hotel, a man of formidable presence, patriarchial beard and piercing sardonic eye. Beaumont asked him to lunch at their table, not feeling in the mood for a "head-to-head" alone with Brayton. He was too full of that sombre oracle to keep it to himself, and presently told the Frenchman, in a failed-facetious way, what the Sandman had divined. The specialist was not deceived and set himself to undo what might well, he saw, be a serious mischief.

"Do not alarm yourself, Sir Rex," he said with a smile; "let me assure you the future *does not exist,* and precognition of all modes is pure fake, as you would put it, and a logical absurdity."

"Yet such foreseeing has a very long history," remarked Brayton, and then wished he hadn't. The Frenchman glanced at him in a cold appraising way. Brayton could not meet his eye.

"Yes, indeed," he replied, "and so have a myriad other childish superstitions. I have read your English philosopher, Dunne, for example. His *Time* is grossly spacial, his *Serial Selves,* the product of a radical psychological confusion, and his *evidence, pour rire.* Let me tell you all such stuff—prophetic dreams, palmistry, crystal-gazing, and this sand nonsense — is all part of the clever charlatan's stock-in-trade. I say *clever* because some of them are endowed with a peculiar faculty. Let me give an example of what I mean. I am very musical, but what is called absolute pitch, the immediate intuitive recognition of all the relationships of a note, is a profound mystery to me. Now these magicians have an equally strange power, called clairvoyance, which is really nothing but just an immediate, intuitive recognition, not of a *note,* but of a *man* from his face and general deportment. '*Deportment* is not quite the word, but you will understand what I mean. By means of it they can make very good guesses as to a man's past, and even his future. In fact I myself have some small gift of this kind. It is a true faculty, but never results in more than a clever guess; there is nothing occult about it whatsover. No, be reassured, Sir Rex, I say with the utmost emphasis the *future does not exist,* and that is the only thing we can know about it. I must say I am surprised at that Sand-Fellow, he is usually more discreet in his humbug."

"He made a highly nebulous divination about me," said Brayton, "and ended up by saying 'And then Allah will be very good to you.' What did he mean by that?"

The Frenchman paused before replying and then said very stiffly, "I do not know, Mr. Brayton, the expression is not familiar to me. Forget all his nonsense, both of you!"

"He's lying, I think," said Brayton to himself. "Anyway Beaumont won't worry any more. That lets me out!"

But he was wrong. Beaumont remained depressed and full of foreboding. Why *hadn't* the Sand-Diviner been more discreet and pronounced the usual smooth things? Because he profoundly believed in the truth of his grim oracle and wished to warn his client. So Beaumont argued. He had always been physically robust enough, but his nervous system was innately fragile, and had been for some time flawed by over-work. He had a heavy programme ahead of him and had been worrying about the maze of detail involved in it during his holiday, which had consequently done him little good. He was in no state to out-face any further strain on his psyche. So Brayton's "joke" had stabbed deep through an impaired organism, and one by nature highly vulnerable to such a thrust.

HIS first role to tackle was the Inquisitor in *Saint Joan* in which he was as good as any Englishman could hope to be. He started re-studying it, and found to his intense dismay that he could not memorize the great speech at the trial. He "fluffed" time after time and always at the same place. He cancelled the revival because he was hopeless. His doctor recommended six months' complete rest, "But what is the use of that," he thought to himself, "when I have less than eleven months at the best to live!" Still he listlessly took the holiday, a sea voyage round the world.

Unluckily he went alone save for one companion, John Barleycorn. That boon comrade and he became inseparable. "Why not," he

told himself, "if I am doomed!" Of course he got no better. In fact he threw himself overboard on the last night before the ship reached Southampton and though they searched for a while, they could not find his body.

When Brayton heard of it he felt very, very badly. Indeed he had been greatly troubled ever since Beaumont had broken down. He kept wanting to tell him it had been a joke, but he just could not. He could not say it to his face and he could not write it. He could go so far as getting writing-paper and shaking his fountain pen, but he could write nothing. He could look down at the paper and see in his mind's eye the letter coming into spectral being line by line, but he could not write it. This had been getting on his nerves. When Beaumont jumped overboard he shut himself up in his room to think. And he had begun to make a confidant of John Barleycorn, too. Of course he had not been responsible for Rex's over-work and break-down, but he knew that some people, if they knew about the "joke," would have called him a murderer and nothing less. It was very lucky no one *did* know—in a way. In another way he would have liked to have got it off his chest. Why had he ever done it? Because Rex's conceit had disgusted him and, yes, because he had got that *knighthood.* Yes, *that* was it. *That* had done it. That's what he wanted to get off his chest and confess loudly and bravely. "It was a lousy trick, a silly, sudden, sodden notion. I was off-balance when I did it and I hadn't the guts to confess to Rex." But he could not face it. It would ruin him, his many enemies would see to that. "I wish to hell I'd never done it, though! It's done me no good and that's a certainty. Actually I miss Rex. I can see now the rivalry between us stimulated me. The bell has tolled for me, too. It was a rotten thing to do."

Whether this belated remorse was due to a sense of sin or a feeling of vague nervous discomfort is doubtful, but he can be given the benefit of it, and, perhaps, after all, the two emotions are pretty much the same.

Certainly it did not, as he had hoped, wear thinner. Rather it steadily intensified, for he was very superstitious, too. He could not get Rex out of his mind, especially as he began dreaming about him and, what was worse, always the same dream. He was standing on a beach gazing out to sea over some rocks. The sea was breaking lightly over the rocks and he was looking for something he knew he did not want to see. He stared hard, watching the lift of each small wave. Presently he saw something white rise on a crest, surge forward and disappear. There it was again, a bit nearer this time, and the next time and the next. And then whatever this was reached the rocks. He wanted to run away but he could not move. Then he saw it climb up on the rocks and come toward him and it was something like a naked man, only there was a difference. For instance where the face should have been, he presently could see was the big ochre shell of a crab, and he could see the claws moving, and that was the worst of all. Just then he always woke up. He had a pretty good idea what that thing was.

IT CAN be imagined that knowing he was going to have this dream, or being almost sure of it, made going to bed a daunting business for Brayton, because it filled him with a great horror, and he was sweating all over and feeling very sick when he woke up. It was not always as clear as has been described, and he had an idea that the more he'd drunk the less clear it was; so he naturally drank a lot just before turning out the light. And after a time he did not turn out the light at all.

Then there was another bother. He was rehearsing *Macbeth,* his best part, now ripe for revival. He had a great natural sympathy for Macbeth with his huge amibition and also his ghostly fears. If the end was the integration of a superior personality and the satisfaction of its potent, clamant rights, then any means were justified; and, again, such a great man was a natural focus round which the Fates—materialized and conflicting tendencies—should gather. He could call spirits from the Vasty Deep and they *would* come when he did call for them. Something like that. Now, however, he saw there was a good deal to be said for Duncan's point of view. Remorse partly and partly, perhaps, that very phrase, "the Vasty Deep" had something to do with it.

THE back parts of theatres during the throes of rehearsal of a big play like *Macbeth* are crowded, scurrying places; chaos to the uninitiated, but really that odd, motley section of humanity on the move about its business is a good example of organized division of labor. Brayton was, of course, quite at home in this come-and-go and could perfectly distinguish the wood from the trees, the combined effort from the atoms composing it.

Yet one of these "trees" began to worry him. Whether it was in a group of scene-shifters, or Scottish Noblemen, or the orchestra, or any grouped bodies contributing to the enterprise, an intruder was sometimes to be seen furtively lurking; very furtively; for the moment Brayton got him properly in his gaze, or rather just before he succeeded in doing so, he at once dissolved and disappeared, presently to reappear elsewhere. During one rehearsal he saw him for a second watching from the Royal Box. The curtains of the box were of light ochre silk and Brayton noticed a certain resemblance.

Of course his colleagues noticed something was the matter with Billy Bennett and whispered and wondered, but they had to confess he had never acted better. He was word perfect and never more moving and intense; the tortured Thane and he seemed absolutely one in spirit indomitably defying all the legions of Earth and Hell and Heaven.

For the first night he plugged himself with as much Scotch courage as he dared, and Dulcinea Delavere, the Lady Macbeth, turned up her nose when she accepted his bouquet and hoped for the best. It certainly was the best; he had never given such a terrific performance, in spite of, perhaps partly on account of, the fact that there was someone who had no business to be there, standing for a flash in the shadows behind the weird sisters, and then entering for a second with Duncan's retinue, and just visible out of the corner of his eye as he tried to seize the phantom dagger. But he was very near breaking-point in the banquet scene, for when he and his lady were surveying the assembled guests and the ghost of Banquo should have entered, it was not Banquo who came in, but someone Brayton had seen terribly often coming towards him across the rocks.

"Which of you have done this?" he cried, and pretty well everyone in the audience felt a quick, damp fear break out on them at the way he spoke that mighty line. Dulcinea, who was watching his face as he spoke it, says she knows she will never forget it, but hopes very much she is wrong.

TO THE audience he seemed entranced and inspired in the true sense of the word, breathing in unearthly air. Indeed at the end of the act the famous critic, Charles Straker, who almost always treats plays and actors as cats treat mice, first lying in wait for them, then playing sadistically with them for a while, and finally driving his claws right home in them, declared loudly in the bar it was the greatest piece of acting he had ever seen and that he'd almost have paid for his seat to witness it. But it wasn't acting, something had snapped in Brayton's brain and he was only vaguely conscious of where he was or what he was doing. However, he carried through to the end, and the expression on his face during the last scene was almost more than the people in the stalls could bear.

When the curtain come down, there was someone waiting for him in the wings. He ran from the stage, floored his dresser with a brutal blow, flung off his motley and dashed from the theatre. He was last seen alive running into Trafalgar Square.

Some mornings later, a prawn fisherman, who was netting the rock pools off Ventnor in the Isle of Wight, came to one of these pools just surrendered by a savage ebbing tide. He peered hard for a moment, and then started to run back to the beach.

The doctor said Brayton had been dead for about three days. The other body, which was resting up against Brayton's, had been dead for very much longer. That body was never certainly identified.

The prawn fisherman said in the pub on the evening of the day he made his discovery: "One thing I'll swear; I'll never eat crab again! Pity, as I liked it more than most things. But not after that!"

The Masher

BY EWEN WHYTE

MISS TIMOTHY, the town's old maid, cackled deliciously and rolled her eyes.

"He's a masher, that's what he is! A masher!"

Her crone's face, wrinkled and splotched as an apple left in the sun, took on an unholy light.

"If there's one thing I *hate,*" she went on, it's mashers!"

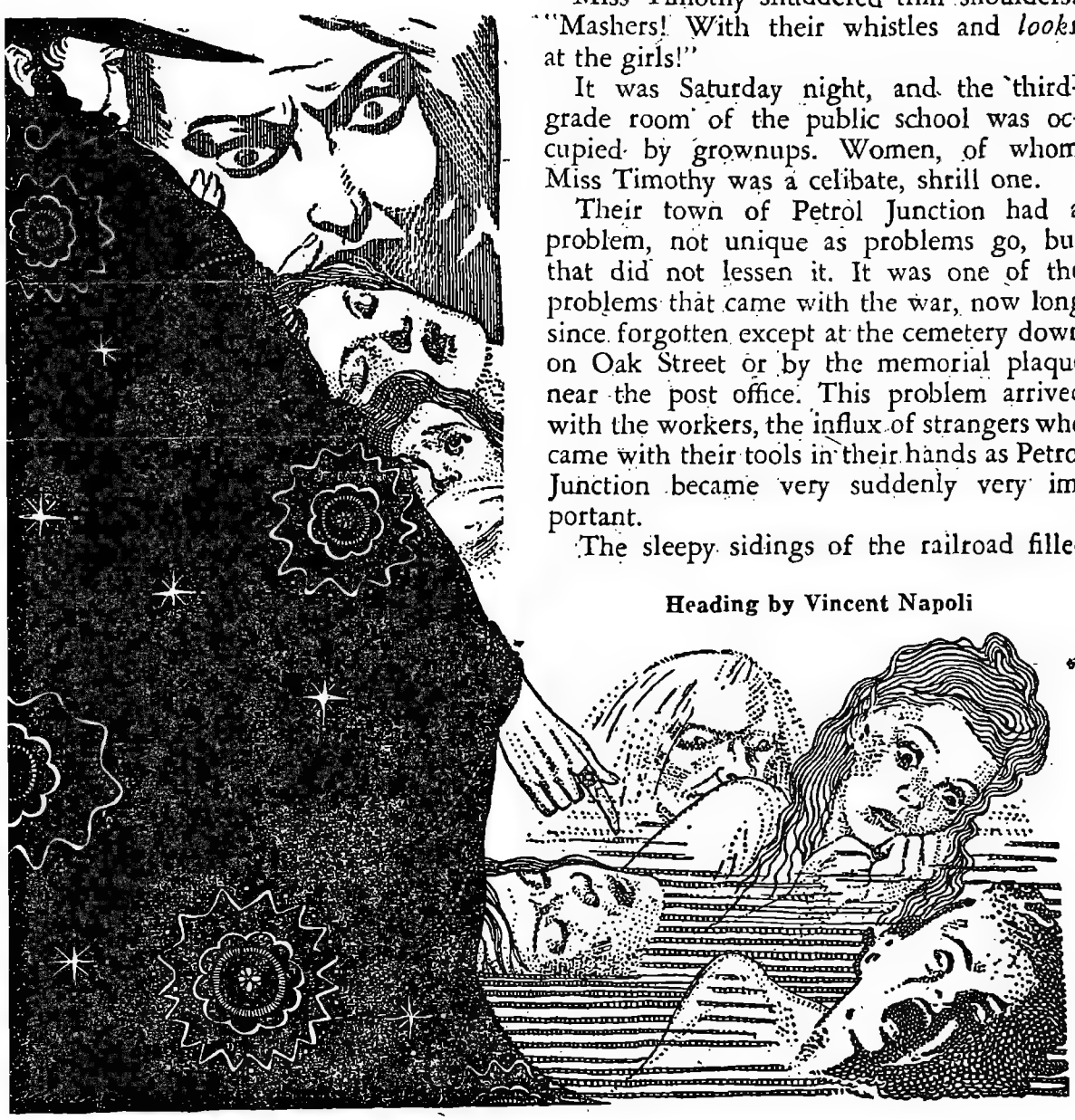
Miss Timothy shuddered thin shoulders. "Mashers! With their whistles and *looks* at the girls!"

It was Saturday night, and the third-grade room of the public school was occupied by grownups. Women, of whom Miss Timothy was a celibate, shrill one.

Their town of Petrol Junction had a problem, not unique as problems go, but that did not lessen it. It was one of the problems that came with the war, now long since forgotten except at the cemetery down on Oak Street or by the memorial plaque near the post office. This problem arrived with the workers, the influx of strangers who came with their tools in their hands as Petrol Junction became very suddenly very important.

The sleepy sidings of the railroad filled

Heading by Vincent Napoli



A strange plague, this; only young and beauteous girls fell victim!

and the once rust-streaked rails shone with use. The home people of the town were lost on its lengthening streets, lost in its enlarging stores, lost in that tidal wave of men and women, but mostly men, who came to work the factories and build new ones.

And that was when it started, those words said by mothers and sisters and girlfriends and fathers: "A girl just isn't safe around anymore!"

They meant, of course, the roustabouts and the factory workers and the oil men and the railroad men and the construction men. All of them whistling and catcalling, looking at a girl and undressing her with their eyes. It's a peculiar talent men have, that kind of look when they look at the short ones and the tall ones, the fat ones and the skinny ones; the ones who say they don't like it but really do, and the ones who just don't like it; most of them girls who came home to families who clucked and shook their heads and talked about the good days before the war and how nice Petrol Junction had been then.

There were the usual appendages of an expanding war town—the shanty villages, the red-light districts, the drunken brawls, and the small police force taxed beyond its strength.

IT WAS the first post-war Christmas when it happened. The town was still full to brimming, but it was Christmas and people wore the bright look of the season as though they were playing so hard at believing in Santa Claus that now they did, along with their hand-tugging youngsters. The stores were filled with people, and the people's pockets were filled with money, and if the spirit of the town that had once been the small village of Petrol Junction groaned at its added weight, nobody could hear above the bustling of the three-days-before-Christmas crowds.

The car was gray, a gray sedan, noted irrelevantly among the other traffic, but it pulled out of line, careened into the wrong lane, spurted up Main Street and slammed to a stop in front of the grimy, two-story brick square that said, "Police." The driver got out and went inside. He came back in an instant with the Chief of Police, a perpetually worried-looking man in his fifties, frightened at what this town had done around him. The driver threw open the back door of the sedan, and the police officer looked in.

Some school children dressed in red cowls with silver-tasseled ropes around their middles, were singing, "Good King Wencelaus" in front of Gay's Dry Goods Store. A passer-by stopped, and the two looking into the sedan became three, and then there were other people. Another policeman came out of headquarters. After a while, somebody appeared with two long poles with loose canvas between. A discerning voice from the crowd whispered over a pyramid of gift packages:

"It's a stretcher! Somebody must be hurt!"

From Gay's Dry Goods Store a block or so away, you could see that somebody, or something, was being carried into the Police Station. That was all. The children by then were singing, "Silent Night."

The paper the next day emblazoned the news: *"Police Baffled by Brutal Murder."* The town was outraged. The victim was young and pretty Jane Abbott by name, a Sunday school teacher.

What with the season of the year and a certain official reluctance, the word "brutal" was used in connection with the killing without any enlargement of detail. But Sergeant Moffett who'd been on duty that night when what was left of Jane Abbott had been brought from the sedan, told his wife, after cautioning her to secrecy: "Terrible, it was! Somebody must've beat her arm and shoulder and head until they was pulp! You couldn't believe it about the head without seein' it! Not round like a human, but almost like a pancake. . . ."

Mrs. Moffett, nodding her head to the secrecy pledge, thrilled to the story and felt the ice at her spine even as she imagined how Mrs. Cooper, her next-door neighbor, would receive this inside news. That's the way it got around.

Jane Abbott

IT WAS a lonely two blocks after one left Railroad Avenue. There was a streetlamp at the corner, but that was all. Jane

hurried, and as she did, the leather briefcase initialed "J. A." that she held in her right hand, bumped against her leg. It was Tuesday, and at Sunday school two days ago the children had written brief compositions. She'd been busy all day yesterday helping Mother sew the new dining-room curtains. She'd yet to correct the children's papers. Jane had picked them up tonight to bring them home with her.

There was snow in the air, she thought, and the last lighted house that she passed had a red paper bell hanging over the door. There was a wreath in the window. Jane walked on, her thoughts on the approaching Christmas.

And then from behind her and away to the side, as though someone stood off the sidewalk in the shadows, she heard a whistle. It was the kind girls hear many times in their lives—insinuating, appreciative and insulting, all at once. It was low and meaningful.

Jane's steps quickened and she did not look around. But through her mind flashed the stories that filled the ice cream parlors, and the hairdressers, the post office and the sewing circles. These fresh, fresh men! A masher, that's what he was!

Her heels clicked on the pavement, and then unmistakably, there came steps behind her. A girl like Jane Abbott does not turn, for that is encouragement. It is inviting. She was only a few short minutes from home, and these . . these creatures were discouraged if you just minded your own business and kept going. All he would ever know of her, she thought with a righteous, smug satisfaction, would be the back of her trim, silk-clad ankles, her neat-fitting polo coat, and the brown curls that spilled out from under her tiny hat onto the tan collar.

The whistle came again. It was more urgent, and nearer. Jane was a religious girl, and this made her feel some sympathy for the misguided masher who followed her. She supposed he wasn't to blame. There were men, many men, drifters, shiftless no-goods, who went from place to place seeking to lure women with looks and whistles.

The steps behind her were very close now. My, but this one was persistent! She supposed. . . Oh, how had it gone the time she'd been up at the State Capital, a year ago when the two fresh young men had come up and said, "Pardon us, Miss, but don't we know you?" Some tired, stupid line like that

Her mouth was dry from walking so fast, and she swallowed to stop the small acorn of fear that rolled around her throat. She heard his breathing, the masher's. And then surprisingly, shockingly—for this she did not expect and could not believe—she felt his hands as they seized her. They were brutally strong. Inhuman hands!

She felt herself lifted into the air by his strength. She felt herself lost in a mighty embrace, and there was no air left in her with which to scream. She realized with a remote part of her consciousness that she was struggling furiously. And then a cruel arm around her throat tightened suddenly, and she blacked out.

When Jane Abbott regained her senses, they told her it was very dark, else she had lost her sight. And they told her she was lying on ground that was both hard and rough. In her was very little strength, and the weakness and restriction she felt might have been from within or without. For a time she did not know. Then she heard something, and she was taken with puzzling what it was. There was light then, of a kind, and more noise.

In those last seconds as bits of realization came to her, Jane Abbott prayed with all the fervent strength of her twenty-four years, for this was an armageddon of almost biblical starkness. Thankfully, before it reached her in its full might and terror, she swam back, down, deep into unconsciousness again.

Ellen Lockwood

ELLEN LOCKWOOD hated this last hour before closing. She came on at one p.m., but the hours went fast, all save the last one from nine to ten. Business at the diner then slowed down, and even Old Man Jessup made less trips out to the gas pump to fill up the late cars. There was a trucker eating crullers and drinking coffee at the end of the counter. She made a swipe

with her cloth at the spigot of the coffee urn. The trucker finished. He put down a nickel and a dime for his supper, a quarter for her.

"So long, Beautiful! See ya!"

She gave him her smile. These truckers! Every time they tipped you good.

The wire screen door banged. It was getting warmer, and Old Man Jessup had the screens on already. He never heard anything, half deaf the way he was, but the banging annoyed her. She looked at her reflection in a half-sized mirror back of the counter. Beautiful, the trucker'd said. Well, she wasn't bad. A calendar saying it was April cut off her hair. She ducked and shook her head. Naturally blonde, too!

The battered chimes clock over the sign, "You Keep Coming—We'll Keep Smiling!" said three to ten. She started putting things away. Then she saw the headlights of a car out near the gas pump. Must be a stranger, she thought. No honking for Pop Jessup. And everyone around these parts knew he was a deafie; they really leaned on the horn when they wanted service

Ellen shrugged out of her apron, took her low heels off and put on her high-heeled pumps. She smoothed her dress and gave her hair a final pat and took her purse out of the little locker in back.

The three minutes were gone, and it was ten. She turned the lights out and left the diner. Maybe Pop was over there by that car. She'd walk over and see. Sometimes if it were someone from around here, she got a lift home, which Old Man Jessup didn't mind; otherwise, he had to get his car out which wheezed and groaned almost as much as he did.

The lights blinded her, and she went around to the side. Was that shadow in the back Pop pumping gas or just one of the pumps? The door opened on her side, and she heard a little whistle. The way a man makes through his teeth. An arm went around her waist, strong and *man!*

"Puleeze!" she protested.

And then a hand went over her mouth, and she felt herself being drawn into the car. She fought as a girl who accepts rides from strange men on occasion but who expects certain rules to be followed will fight when they are violated. The rough stuff was out. She bit, and the hand went away but the arm around her body tightened. She yelled at him and reached for the door to fight her way out.

"You fresh masher! Who do ya think you're playin' your rough tricks on!"

But the hand came back again, this time at her throat before she had time to let out more than one good yelp—and Pop Jessup was deaf anyway.

The car rolled to life, pulled away from the gas pump past the now dark diner, and headed along the road leading out of town.

SOMEWHERE on her trip to a black nowhere, Ellen fought herself sick and faint. She'd done her share of wrestling with men, but this one was a hellion. His one arm, hooked around her neck despite all her efforts, made her head spin, and the knot of sickness at her stomach grew. She finally slumped weakly. At another time she might have divined the direction they were taking, but now with her head spinning so and the car taking so many turns, she gripped her hands tightly and tried to hold onto what was left of consciousness.

After an immeasurable time, the car stopped. She was pulled roughly from it. In the moment before her assailant switched off his headlights, she saw something that struck a reminiscent chord. She knew where she was. And she also glanced at him, and that drove the other recognition from her mind. What she saw of him was darkened by the blackness of the night, hooded by shadow, and of his features and face, there was nothing that stood out as much as one single impression. He was looking forward to something. In a maniacal, beyond-normal way, there was sport to be had, and she was it!

Ellen turned then, and with a last galvanic spurt of strength from her young body, broke her freedom, but he was on her almost instantly, and his fist clubbing at the side of her head drove her into the ground and a blackness deeper than the night.

When she came to, it was with a feeling of weight upon her legs. Her hand felt

something in reaching out that defied identification. She knew she must get up. She knew that whatever might have happened, there would be worse to come, and for the moment she was alone with the whisper of the wind in the spring night. She wondered if Pop Jessup had heard her scream; or finding her gone, would he do anything about it or just surmise she'd gone off with some "fellah?"

It was characteristic that Ellen accepted her aloneness. She rose up slowly on elbows that ached. There was a sound from in the night that gave her at first a great and leaping hope, but then she felt the poor, weak imprisonment of herself, and waves of sickness suddenly flooded her whole being. She became conscious of her swollen body and touched it irrelevantly with fingers that shook.

Even then it was hard to correlate what was going on.

Was there a light in the blackness, or was he coming again? There was a sound with the other noise, and the last one, she realized, was from her own lips. Her face was wet with stinging tears and she cried out to the darkness that was now not quite so dark. There could be nothing but the sky and the ground to know as Ellen Lockwood *knew*. And if the scream that she screamed then would not continue for all eternity in that dark place, expending its terror against all of time as she *sensed* and *saw* and *guessed* and then *felt* . . .

Hester Greene

HESTER GREENE did a shiver, a shimmy, and a bump-and-grind routine at the Patio, a place a couple of miles outside of Petrol Junction where Western Highway runs into a new fork made by Route 73 under construction.

She was fighting a losing battle with the thirties. On her side was makeup and foundation garments and clothes cut to minimize her broadening figure and more time spent in the selection and application of these. Against her was the inexorable advance of the years. Hester Greene had never known the real bright lights, but she had played some of the better back alleys and byways from New York to L. A. The war had sent her into a USO group where the always-appreciative soldier audiences bolstered her morale.

She tried to tell herself that the Patio was a "comer" and that Petrol Junction, even if not known too well outside of the state, was a place not to be sneezed at. Why, even Al, the owner himself, talked about what that new Route 73 would do for business when it was completed.

Sometimes the routine got her. She sang "Slow Boat to China" and then circulated among the tables where the customers were guzzling beer or cheap liquor. Then she'd sing an oldie like "Some of These Days" and circulate some more, and then one like "Here I'll Stay" which was a laugh, and ain't it the truth, she'd say to herself on bitter nights.

Her arrangement called for a room in the cottage in back, and in the beginning Al, the owner, had come in and pawed at her half-heartedly, but he was an easy one to discourage and, God, how she hated men who were easy to discourage!

The faces at the tables came and went. Jobbers, salesmen, truckers, an occasional couple or fellow and girl out here after the moving-picture show. She got so she could scream. It was a year and a half now she'd been at the Patio, and she thought, Hell, I ought to move! But fear tugged at her and tied her down. She didn't need to spend much here.

Where else would she go, and fifty bucks a week was fifty bucks.

In the early summer she took to walking down the road evenings before she had to be back. There was a path that paralleled Western Highway. It was lonely out here except for the strip of concrete. The path curved away through bushes and trees, declined into a valley where construction machines stood soundless at the head of advancing new Route 73 pushing its grading and road-bed laying and concrete-mixing activities before it. She liked it out here at this time of night. The country was wild except for this scar that men had made with their machines. Soon the focus of the road work would push beyond her and be lost in the hills and valleys to the west.

But now the derricks and the steamshovels and the fill trucks and the steamrollers stood as though forever signalled into this twilight retreat by each five o'clock.

This particular evening the inexpensive watch on Hester's wrist showed it was time to turn back, and she had taken the first step homeward towards the Patio three-quarters of a mile distant when she heard the whistle. It came out of the woods, and it was the complimentary kind a man pays to a woman. Hester Greene quickened her steps. None of these bush-wacky old codgers for me! she thought. Even in her time here at the Patio—yes, she often thought of it like a jail sentence—she'd heard of some of the old recluses that lived in these hills. Loneliness kind of touches you, doesn't it? You ought to know, Hester, she'd say to the mirror at night.

The whistle came again and the crackle of twigs and underbrush. And then, so abruptly that she had either miscalculated his distance from her when she first heard the sound, or his speed in approaching her, he stood before the girl. Hester started to speak, and that message to the brain was caught and passed by the inclination and desperate need to scream. His powerful blow caught her squarely on the mouth and drove the scream from her as it bruised and tore her lips against her own teeth and felled her to the ground. She lay unable to move, tasting the tartness of her own blood and watching fascinatedly as the floating apparition of a gigantic club-like foot drove at her head.

HESTER GREENE came to in a tomb. The sides and top were made of impenetrable blackness. Through the hurt and sickness of her bruises, she had enough awareness left to worry petulantly about what time it was. Her wrist watch was intact. It had not been robbery, then. She was annoyed that the tiny dial was not radium-lit. But it must be well past the time for her appearances at the Patio. What would Al think, and was he looking for her?

She thought then, of the stories told in Petrol Junction. Things happened to girls here. Well, didn't they anywhere? But here in Petrol Junction just recently there'd been that young Sunday school teacher, beaten to death, they said it was. But there were stories more awful than that. Then several girls had disappeared. Al talked about one who'd worked down at old Man Jessup's gas station diner. There'd been a couple since then. You never went into Petrol Junction proper but that old ladies didn't buttonhole you in the dry goods store and talk about all the fresh young men around—the mashers.

These thoughts going through Hester's mind took up the time it has taken to relay them. And then she was all attention on something outside of herself. Her legs were encased strangely, her struggles to free them of little avail. Her hands in the impenetrable gloom reached blindly, fumbling.

Then there was a fire, a small flickering, steaming fire through the tunnel of night. It grew brighter and larger, and the sound accompanying it grew apace.

She saw and recognized then, with unusual agility of a mind that had gone to waste as a third-rate chanteuse, what was to happen to her.

They said up at the Patio—Al with his hands folded over his big stomach with the Mason's emblem hanging from the chain—they said, Hester's a crooner, a noodler type. Give it to her soft and lilting. That's what she carries the best.

They should have heard her then, the men of the four-piece combo who chewed gum as they riffled out "Slow Boat to China." They should have heard her voice, the sound it made for the night and the valley and the hills.

The combos of all ages would have wondered.

When she was eleven, Hester had dreamed of singing at the Met, and a small-town teacher to this small-time small fry had said, "But Hester, you have a *little* voice, a *delicate* voice, of some quality but no size!" Wherever you are, Singing Teacher, listen to Hester now! What is a woman's scream? Is it high C, or something unwritten in melody and music? But listen, Singing Teacher, to Hester Greene tonight!

Judith Moran

JUDITH, with her red hair that shone so under the sun, came from one of the—as they like to call themselves—good families of Petrol Junction. She'd had advantages, which mainly consisted of things like not having to live in Petrol Junction all the time, going away to college, and being able to talk about things, at least for a time, other than men and clothes.

The Morans had a modernistic white stucco house out towards the valley. There were a hundred acres of Moran-owned property. There was a swimming pool and a couple of riding horses and two new cars in the garage, one of which, the open convertible, Judith enjoyed driving at great speed through the countryside. Judith had a figure, and she liked to show it. She used to drive to the country club for tennis in her shorts, and often, despite Mrs. Moran's objections, she would stop in town for the paper or some magazines or something else, still in her shorts, pleasing the old men and drawing whistles from the younger ones and scathing remarks from other women who were jealous of her splendid, generous figure and showed it by disapproval.

Judith was a restless girl, and that restlessness came out in different ways. The men, some of them most attractive and well-positioned who pursued her for her looks or her money or both, never, somehow, focussed into one, *the* man.

Her mother had long since resigned herself to seeing Judy, stimulated by an article in a travel magazine, on the spur of the moment decide to go south or north or east or west. Old Mr. Moran, who had made all that money in canned goods, had no strength left to fight his daughter. And Mrs. Moran's fluttering objections never stayed the determination of this only child.

But there was something else now, and as an enthusiastic reader of detective stories and horror fiction, Judith gloated over such things. The brutal killing of Jane Abbott, whom Judith had known as that "sweet-faced, smug Sunday school teacher at the West Street Church," the disappearance of other girls in town—always girls, mind you—most recently Ellen Lockwood and Hester Greene, these things piqued Judith's curiosity. It was as if in a twenty-three-year-old lifetime of uselessness, Judith felt a sudden compelling urge. Somebody, something, had it in for the girls of Petrol Junction.

With the war boom, the town had taken on a lusty, profane character, and with the war and its boom forgotten now in the world's uneasy peace and the individual's leveling-off salary, the noisy, boisterous, dangerous part of the town that people had said and shrugged, "Well, c'est la guerre!" was still with them.

Petrol Junction was a dangerous place for young, pretty girls. Judy liked that idea, and it was the one thing that cancelled a trip to Bermuda or Placid or Sun Valley or Catalina, and again, the discomfort of her parents in a town where girls walked now at night with escorts if they could or swiftly if they couldn't, with eyes over their shoulders, was discounted.

Judy took to hanging around Police Headquarters. Sergeant Moffett, married man and all that he was, was her pet foil. He all but melted in the attentions of this red-headed girl and compared her in his mind's eye, and most unfavorably, with his mid-forties wife. Even Police Chief James, a worried man who knew well that politics and the support of the right people kept the likes of him in as police chief, did his best to be civil.

From the files when nobody was around but Sergeant Moffett, Judith started on what meager facts the Petrol Junction authorities had on Jane Abbott's killing and the disappearances of those other girls down through Lockwood and Greene.

"People don't just vanish!" she opined once to Sergeant Moffett. She'd read the line in a criminology book from the library.

THE Sergeant seemed impressed and waggled his head in agreement. Judith talked about it at home, and her interest in the whole affair continued longer than she'd ever before been able to stay enthusiastic over water colors or piano lessons or archery or any of the thousand and one hobbies and arts she'd fussed with.

Judy may have been petulant, spoiled, and somewhat ill-mannered, with her family's money behind her to smooth over the consequences, but she was not a fool. She came to have, after a while, some theories of her own about what it was in Petrol Junction that threatened womankind. The theories were numerous, just as the people she considered were numerous. She would walk in the streets at evening and look at men's faces; she'd become considerably enchanted with a book on criminal physiognomy.

There were workers from the factories that had been converted from war to peace purposes. There were store clerks, construction men from the new road out in the valley. She looked at them, and many of them looked back and smiled, as what man wouldn't when a ravishing redhead gives him the eye?

And after a while, she became depressed and a little fearful that so many of the faces she studied were animal and brutal, capable, she thought, of almost any act of violence. It made her task harder. But then, she found with some redeeming satisfaction, that the women's faces were as bad. The rouge and the powder and red painting the thick, cruel lips. The sharp or pudgy or sagging features hiding the smallness of their souls and the bigness of their hatreds underneath the facade of womanhood. Faces, if you study them too hard, Judith decided, were, well, not to be studied too hard!

ON THIS Saturday night the streets were empty of even the last stragglers turned out from the eleven o'clock movie as Judith walked to where she'd left her convertible. She'd had some small tasks to do after supper and then she'd sat longer than she'd meant to at the icecream parlor looking at the young faces of the high-school crowd as they came in with their dates for sundaes and sodas. These faces were more crude and open. Because of their youth, life had done less to them, and they were not yet marked by the stamp of bitterness that comes with the passing of time.

When she left the store, it was nearing midnight. The streets were dark and deserted and she felt uncomfortably conspicuous as her high heels clicked down the lonely pavements. She was two blocks away from her car when she heard quick steps behind her. Judith Moran knew as much as anyone in Petrol Junction, what the authorities, what any human agency knew about those other girls. Her heart and steps quickened, and she felt the cold hand of fear touch her spine with thrilling fingers.

The streets ahead of her, as far as she could see, were devoid of people, with here and there a small pool of light where a lamppost stood sentinel. The store fronts were black now. With great control, she kept herself from breaking into a run. The steps behind her quickened even more, and she could hear, yes, she could hear the quick breath of her pursuer.

All at once she realized that the steps were not those of a man, and at the same time, a quavering voice hailed her and with recognition Judith stopped and turned, feeling very foolish, the pounding of her heart slowing as she said:

"Why, Miss Timothy! It's you!"

The spinster came up, her sharp features pinched in the gloom.

"Judith Moran! Child, what are you doing roaming the streets at this hour?"

Judith made a small excuse about her errands. The old woman at her side bobbed her head.

"Now, now, that's ridiculous! You know the things that happen to young girls in this town! You'll want to know we've just had a meeting up at the school about that . . . that masher! Just because it's been a little time since the last girl disappeared . . ." and Miss Timothy wagged her head, and her smile, Judith thought, was unpleasant like her skin and her features and her bent form.

"With that masher around, nobody's safe!" The spinster chattered on as the two walked the rest of the way to Judith's car. They reached it, Judy unlocked it and slid onto the seat.

"How about you, Miss Timothy? Can't I give you a lift home?"

The old woman clucked, "I'm just a little piece away from home."

"But you oughtn't to be out with this masher around." It was a small compliment Judy paid.

Miss Timothy grew serious. "I know. I know. None of us are safe, child. But I'd like to see that monster try anything on *me!*"

She leaned over the door of the car and hissed at Judith. "We're going to get him! At the meeting tonight, we found out there are some special agents from the State Capital down here investigating!"

The spinster looked around as if the masher, himself, might intercept this news or the streets might have interest in it.

"Nobody's supposed to know that!"

"Oh," said Judith, a little nettled that her good friend, Sergeant Moffett, hadn't revealed such a choice bit of news.

Miss Timothy's claw-like hand gripped the car, and her face screwed up as it did when she talked. Judith wondered if it was being unloved that made old spinsters like Miss Timothy so unattractive.

"Now go right home, child. You don't want to have happen to you what happened to those other girls!"

Judith drove off into the night out of town. The cool air felt good against her cheek; and she accelerated into the tunnel of brilliance her headlights cut in the dark. For a while, as she approached her house, she thought of pushing on into the valley, but a small feeling of doubt pursued this inclination. She turned into the driveway of her stucco home.

So people up at the State Capital were worried about what was going on at Petrol Junction! Special agents, huh!

THE next day was Sunday, a morning by Judith's ritual to spend sleeping in bed. But not this Sunday. She startled the maid by eight-thirty breakfast, and she had her convertible out of the garage and on the road by nine.

It was a glorious day of brightness and blue sky and soft, fragrant breeze. She drove deep into the valley and out along Western Highway. She had passed Pop Jessup's and then ahead a ways was the Patio. It struck her that the Abbott girl's body, partially crushed flatter than a pancake, as Sergeant Moffett, big-eyed, had told her, had been found hereabouts.

She took a side road, ran for a mile or so into the woods and parked the car on a shelf of grass off the road. She had on low-heeled shoes, and it was such a day for walking! She took a stout walking-stick out of the back seat and started out. Judith was not ordinarily an enthusiastic outdoors girl, but this time a sense of adventure pervaded her.

A footpath that she remembered having taken some years ago led from the crown of the road across the hill to the right. She set out upon it and soon came to a ridge that looked down on the right to the sweep of Western Highway disappearing across the plainland ahead, and to the left the new Route 73, still under construction, in the valley's lap.

From here the machines of road construction looked small. It was Sunday, and they were unused, untended, save for a watchman she could make out down below there in the valley. She would talk to him.

The path was circuitous, and it took her some time. When she emerged on the valley floor, she was somewhere below the head of the construction advance. The road here was laid in neat pattern, the concrete poured into its iron beds, and Judith, as she walked forward to where she supposed the watchman to be, thought that it would be fun to drive through here in her convertible.

She marveled at the miracle of the roadworkers, for these things were alien to her sheltered life, and though she had traveled and experienced a lot, there was much that as the daughter of a rich man who did little but clip coupons, was beyond her ken. It did her credit that she was stimulated by them and not merely bored with the supercilious superiority of many of her age and bringing-up. But Judith was no fool. It pleased her the neat way the concrete was laid out, the pattern of lines in it caused by the adhesive tar runs.

It was because her eyes were running along ahead of her that she saw the small thing. It was so small that she would not see it again in a million years, and then with her stick, she began to worry at it, to pry it out of its cement tomb.

She was so busily engaged that she didn't hear him come up. Then she looked up and said, "Oh!"

He was a massive figure in blue denim, and his face was mild and a bit reproachful, so she wanted to apologize and tell him she was up to no harm. Judith fixed the watchman with her very nicest smile.

MR. MORAN, at his fluttering wife's insistence, called Police Chief James at a few minutes past nine. It was last night that they were upset about. Judith had come home well after midnight, with the explanation to her waiting-up parents that she'd simply been sitting in an icecream parlor watching the after-movie crowd.

"That's not right, Judith," her mother had complained.

Judy, making no answer, had gone up to bed.

"She seems to be brooding these days. The doctor says she's not sick! Charles," Mrs. Moran said to her husband, "I don't think that girl should be fussing around with those policemen down there, concerning herself, with the unfortunate troubles some of those poor, poor girls have had. It's . . it's unnatural! She goes down and sits there in that place with that middle-aged Sergeant—what's his name—Roberts, or Moffett? Moffett, that's it! And he's a married man, too! Now, Charles, you tell Police Chief James not to humor her. Why I really think the girl has listened to too many of these detective programs!"

Mr. Moran dutifully called up, and as the town's most influential and moneyed citizen, Police Chief James dutifully listened and oh'ed and agreed at the right times.

During the conversation, Mrs. Moran disappeared and reappeared in the library from whence her husband was phoning. She was fluttering even more.

"You know what, Charles? Judith has already had breakfast and taken her car and gone somewhere! That girl's up to something and I'm worried!"

Mr. Moran, seeking surcease from his wife's nagging, relayed this information even down to the state of his wife's mind, to Police Chief James.

At Headquarters, that worthy hung up the phone with a sigh. He had enough troubles in Petrol Junction without having to worry about young-lady daughters of wealthy residents who became infatuated with police work. It isn't as though these amateurs ever did any damn good! And now these two investigators down from the State Capital were on his hands.

ONE of them was sitting across from his desk now grinning at him. This man's name was Savage, and he couldn't look more bland, was Police Chief James' thought. His partner, Turner, was an equally smooth-looking article. These men were products of big-town scientific police work. James could just bet they'd never wielded any night sticks at a berserk criminal in their lives! They wore neat-fitting, double-breasted suits and packed thin .32 automatics instead of a good man-sized revolver. They talked psychology and sociology and things like that.

Sergeant Moffett came in, Turner with him, and Police Chief James put the question to his righthand man.

"Moffett, Old Man Moran's down on my ears about that daughter of his. Just see to it she doesn't hang around here anymore! That's an order!"

Moffett yes-sirred, but disappointment stuck out all over him. She was such a pretty one!

"You don't have any ideas where she's skidoodled off to this morning? What did she say to you the last time—I suppose it was yesterday—" the Police Chief put in sarcastically, "the last time you saw her?"

Moffett, with three pairs of eyes on him, colored and mumbled what he could remember.

James snorted, "These amateurs! And a chit of a girl at that! They've got no right . . ."

"I don't know," Turner said. "They often get a fresh slant on things. By instinct, luck, or intuition, occasionally they stumble on things the rest of us miss. I've seen it happen."

Savage nodded corroboration. James looked crest-fallen and fiddled with a paper on his desk.

"Anyway, now we've got to find Miss Moran!" He emphasized the name sarcastically.

"Let's go down that way," Savage said, suddenly rising.

James, thinking of the next election, lifted himself to his feet. "Okay, Sergeant, get the car!"

The three met Moffett at the front of the Police Station, and as they started to pile in, James was accosted by Miss Timothy, who hailed him in a shrill voice.

"You've got a clew, Chief! I can just tell!" The spinster cackled. "And I hope it's a good one because it's just about time . . ." her voice lowered and her face lit up simultaneously. ". . . it's just about time for another one of our girls to be taken! And I'll tell you one thing, Chief. I'm athinkin' it might be someone like that too-pretty Judith Moran!"

The Chief stopped at that.

"Whaddya mean?"

Savage and Turner were listening now, too.

"Well . . . said Miss Timothy, surprised and pleased at the reaction her words had had.

Savage took command now.

"Why not get in the car with us, madam? We're going out towards the Morans."

Miss Timothy was only too glad. It was probably the first time in her life she'd been the center of attraction of four men.

"IT'S a bobby pin!" Judith announced, having freed the small piece of metal from the road cement. "Look!" She held it up triumphantly.

The watchman in blue denim stepped closer and reached out a huge hand to take it from her, looking at it wonderingly. He threw it away then and spat as though that was his opinion of construction workers who wore bobby pins.

"How do you suppose it got there?" Judith said curiously.

He wagged his head. "Dunno."

My, you're a big one, she thought with secret female admiration. Whatever you're watching I'll bet gets watched good!

"Is it all right if I walk up front with you?"

He didn't seem to mind, and the two of them walked along the roadbed, Judith chattering.

"How do you suppose that bobby pin got there?" she went on.

They passed a steamshovel, and she marveled at its giant metal teeth.

"Have you ever run one of those?"

He grinned and said, "Sure!"

"I'll bet," she breathed and flashed him another smile.

They'd come to the head of the construction work now. There were trucks parked by the side waiting for the Monday humans who would make them live and work again; another steamshovel, a steamroller and a derrick. Judith thought of something and stamped her foot petulantly the way she did with her father at home.

"Why did you throw that bobby pin away? You know that might have been some sort of evidence. I mean . you know, these girls that've been disappearing. You don't have girls working on this road, Mister Watchman!"

He smiled at her and shook his head.

"Well, I think that should've been taken back to Police Chief James. How do we know it didn't belong to one of those poor girls!"

Excitement grew in her, and she started thinking of just where he'd thrown it to the ground.

"Maybe I could find it again," she thought aloud.

That was a stupid thing for him to have done, but she didn't suppose a workman would be a workman or an old watchman if he were very smart, and anyway he was so big and so cute, with blond, blond hair and those light eyes!

"I'm going back to find that bobby pin!" Judith said firmly, "and I want you to help me!"

She looked up at him appealingly.

Oh, you're lazy, she thought to herself. He isn't going to help me.

She turned to go, thinking that that would arouse some chivalry, but instead, he caught her by the wrist.

"Now look .

His hands were awfully strong on her. She looked up at him, still more coy,

than angry. She'd been handling men since she was twelve years old. He pulled her closer, and his hands around her waist hurt her back.

"Wait a minute!" She struggled now. "What's the matter with you! You stop it right this instant!"

He grinned at her, and his big, strong teeth looked something like the teeth on the steamshovel. He was so much bigger than she was. Anger was mounting in her now, and she had enough freedom of her right arm to swing her walking stick at his side. She hit him once with it, an ineffectual blow, but the lightness seemed to go out of his blue eyes and they turned abruptly like a summer sky with thunder storm.

His hands were around her throat suddenly, and she felt for the longest time her small feet bouncing off his steel-like shins as she kicked and kicked and kicked, she didn't know how many times but with endless futility, until finally it was as though she'd kicked herself deep into the ground where everything was a roaring black.

It couldn't have been very long when she came to, because he was tying her hands to iron fixtures in the road and she was nearly flat on her back and there was a strange gray blanket drawn up to her waist. The beginnings of knowing were in Judith now and she wondered as one does at such times with a remote and terrible detachment what instinct had driven her to this dreadful rendezvous.

He finished with his task and walked a little piece away. When she saw what he was doing and what he was about to do, the whole thing fell into place, from the bobby pin to the now. She screamed and prayed that it was as she had thought at the beginning when they had begun to struggle, that he was a ruthless man bent on her dishonor.

But now she knew, and with the tree-sided slopes of the valley watching bleakly, she knew there was no chance for deliverance.

She prayed that she would die, prayed that she would faint before this thing could happen.

THEY had stopped briefly at the Moran's stucco house and then had gone on, spurred by Mrs. Moran's growing uneasiness and Mr. Moran's orders to "do something! James, you're Police Chief!"

They had taken Western Highway, for that was the way the maid had seen Judith's convertible head, and then by some chance they'd taken the right turn-off.

They found her car, and it was only seconds after that as they poured from their own vehicle, that they heard the faraway screams carried on the lonely country air. Savage and Turner ran ahead along the narrow path. James and Moffett pushed along as best they could with Miss Timothy still chattering, bringing up the rear. They took the path as it twisted and wound and finally came out on the ridge looking down on Route 73, and there they stood, hundreds of yards away.

But the sun, reaching down a broad, yellow finger, pointed out the scene for them, picking out and highlighting Judith Moran's red, red hair as she lay in the still semi-nude steel roadbed of the new construction, highlighted the figure in blue denim crouched in his machine.

The men, even as they reached for their guns, felt horror numb their fingers and blanch their faces. Miss Timothy leaned forward, her far-sighted eyes squinting to take in every detail of the tableau.

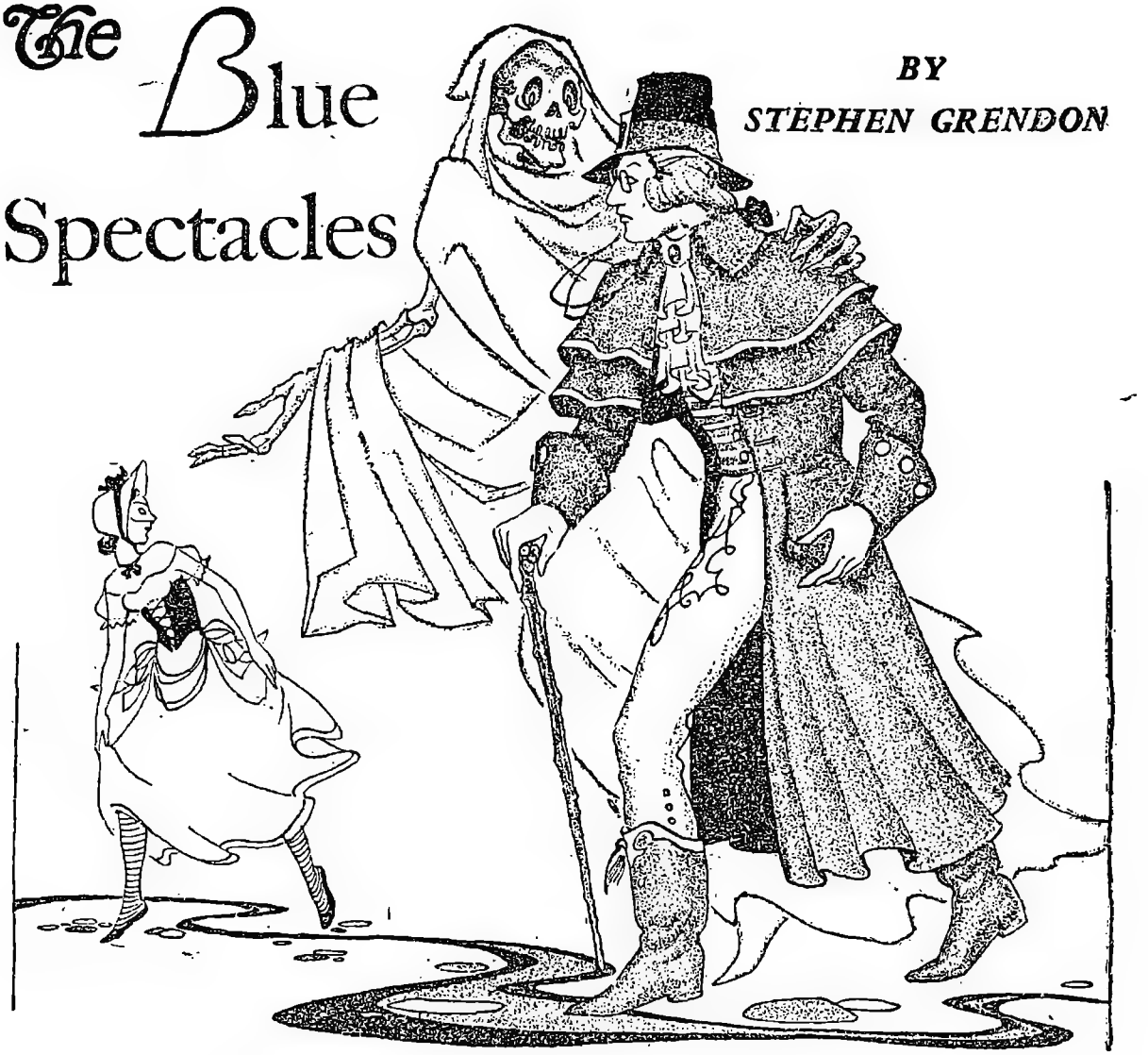
The only sound was the putt, putt and rumble of the steamroller as it drove forward. The figure in blue denim hunched over the controls and the spat of the men firing their little revolvers was lost in the vastness of the valley, just as their far-flung bullets tapped and poked misdirected lead futilely.

The steam-driven roller moved on with inexorable speed, and even as the men tore down the valley side, the redness of Judith Moran's hair was gone, and there was nothing, nothing as the steamroller finally reversed and backed rumblingly up, but another gray concrete square neatly in its steel bed, and Miss Timothy, left behind on the ridge, shrieking at the top of her old voice:

"It's the masher, I tell you! *It's the masher!*"

The Blue Spectacles

BY
STEPHEN GRENDON



WHEN he reached Cartagena, Jesse Brennan knew that his traveling was done. He was old, he was tired, and his illness had finally become too burdensome; he could not go on. A doctor confirmed it: he had perhaps a month to live, perhaps not that. Cartagena was sunny and warm; the Atlantic shone cobalt from dawn to dusk; the ancient walls of the old Colombian city pleased him. He had done more than one man's share of exploring, of poking about in the old places and the odd corners of the earth; he had no one to mourn him but a few old friends scattered over the globe; he might as well die in Cartagena as anywhere. Back home in the United States it would be winter now, and he had no taste for winter—better the sun and the cloudless sky and the restless sea.

There remained the problem of disposing of those trifles he had collected—the things of value to fellow collectors. He set about this without delay, so that the burden of thinking about this final task might not cloud his last days. The stone clock of mysterious Indian origin could go to Faulkner in Cairo. Stuart could have the old German book bound in human skin. Rawlings, a hermit in his Edinburgh garret, would enjoy the curious figurines from Burma, and Vac-

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

Only a man whose soul is untouched by sin dares gaze through the blue glass

lav would find Prague more interesting if he were the possessor of the Borgia ring. But to whom to send the blue spectacles? Ah, that was a problem! The old Chinese mandarin from whom he had got them had been convincingly solemn about the wonderful properties of the spectacles. Where, he wondered, could he find a man whose soul was "untouched" by sin, lest, by gazing through the blue glass something should befall him?

He thought about the disposal of the blue spectacles for two days. After he had packed and shipped everything else, the spectacles remained. But then, in the night, under a guileless moon, it came to him: Alain Verneil, of course! Too honest for his own good, too sincere to recognize hypocrisy, faithful, dogged, moral—yes, the blue spectacles would be safe with him, if indeed they had any of the properties attributed to them. He did not remember Verneil's address, nor could he find it anywhere in his things, but Verneil had been curator of some sort of museum in New Orleans, and he would doubtless be in the directory; so he did up the spectacles in a compact box, wrote a letter to enclose with his gift—"I got these from an old Chinese in Tibet. How old they are I don't know; he didn't know, either.

"They are reputed to be magic, in a peculiar way. If anyone who is not wholly good looks through them something will happen to him—I gather that he will be given sight of himself in some previous incarnation or time or something of that sort, and that it will not be pleasant. Or a change of identity in which punishment shall fit his crimes—you know how these legends go. I am almost ashamed to confess that the old fellow was so convincing that I myself never wore them. I was never 'good,' much less 'wholly good,' and at this stage there is hardly any use lying about that, is there?" —addressed it to Alain Verneil, New Orleans, Louisiana, U. S. A., scrawled across one corner of the package, "Directory Service, Please," and dispatched it.

He put no return address on it, because Verneil would recognize the "Jesse" who had signed the letter. In any case, it did not matter; he was dead before the little package reached New Orleans.

IT CAME into the city on the first day of the annual Mardi Gras, and, being marked for directory service, it was passed along to the proper quarters, where a much-harassed clerk, wishing her day over and her work done—though there were hours yet to pass—received it among other pieces of mail similarly marked. All in good time she came to the package from Cartagena, noticing the stamps first, and thinking of her niece's stamp collection. Being constantly subject to all kinds of script, she had developed some facility in reading the scrawls that passed beneath her eye. But Jesse Brennan's script, while superficially legible, tended toward carelessness, so that his i's were dot-less, and many of his consonants run together, with the result that, shifting her eyes from the stamps to the address she must service, she read it at once: Alan Verneul—and why should she not, when one of Alan Verneul's most spectacular divorce cases had been won that day, and his name was everywhere from the *Globe* to the *Picayune?* And who, but somebody in Colombia, would not know his address? She added it to Brennan's script, and sent the package on its way.

AT THE moment of its arrival, Alan Verneul was at the telephone. Where was the domino he had ordered? He knew it should be in his hands; indeed, it should have awaited him on his return from court, but, though his costume and everything else was in perfect readiness, there was no domino. And none other to be had, admitted his costumer reluctantly. Verneul's first thought, therefore, at the arrival of the package, was that the missing domino had turned up, though it was long since in the hands of a black roisterer, who had found it where it had been lost out of the package from the costumer's.

But sight of the stamps disillusioned him. Nevertheless, he opened it, wondering whom he knew in Cartagena, where he had never been. He looked first at the signature. Perhaps Jesse Melanchton, who had gone to South America somewhere after his day in court. The letter puzzled him. He misread its salutation, which, characteristically, Brennan had written so that it might have been Alan, Alain, or Allen; he had no rea-

son to feel that any error had been made. Still, Melanchton was likely to remember the address of his apartment.

He came at last to the spectacles.

Even he could recognize their age—it needed no explanation, such as was in the letter, for the glass in the spectacles was a strange cloudy blue, a kind of smoky blue the like of which he had never seen before; and their frame was evidently hand-wrought, of silver. He put them down on his dressing-table and read the letter once more. A curious thing, certainly. Whoever Jesse was, he was a superstitious man just as certainly.

He brushed the letter and the wrapping of the package to one side, and was about to lay the spectacles away when a thought struck him. He looked at the spectacles once again. They were large, square; they had but a narrow bridge, and were thickly-framed. Awkward thing to wear, no doubt, but in the circumstances, quite proper. They were not out of character, since Verneul was about to join the maskers in the costume of a New Orleans dandy of more than a century ago, and the blue spectacles would do very well indeed in place of the missing domino.

He carried them to a mirror and put them on. He could not have devised a better concealment for his eyes, for he could see through them very well, but none could see his eyes behind them.

There were reasons why he would not like to be known behind his mask. There were irate husbands and equally irate fathers, some of whom had threatened him with various degrees of dire punishment. Moreover, as a divorce lawyer, he entertained many feminine clients, who, if they were not guilty of adultery when they came to him, were guilty at leaving, Verneul having a facility for exacting fees in coin other than money. His success in court bred envy and contempt; his success with the ladies bred hatred and jealousy. But his boldness knew no end, and his self-assurance never faced retreat.

He got dressed, went outside, and took a cab to where the roistering crowds were gay along the streets. There he left the cab and mixed among them: tall saturnine, handsome still young at forty and attractive. Secure before his roving eyes, he wore the blue spectacles.

HE HAD taken part in the Mardi Gras many times before. It was no novelty to him, and he had not come particularly to enjoy the celebrants or even to watch the parades and the floats; his role was predatory, and his eyes darted hither and yon in search of likely women who might be unable to resist his charms. He walked leisurely about; now that he was in the midst of the celebrants, he had ample time at his disposal, and there was no need to hasten. There were hours yet before he need make his choice among the masked women who danced all around him.

He had not gone far, however, before he reflected that he had never seen the crowds quite so riotous and gay, and, thinking thus, he chanced to look up to see where he was. After a moment of puzzled gazing, here and there, he had to admit to himself that he did not know; somehow, he had wandered into a section of the city completely strange to him, despite certain similarities in old gables and corners. Observing this, he stood quite still and scrutinized his surroundings with his practiced legal eye. During the interval of his examination, he saw surprising things abounding.

There were no street-lamps of any kind.

There was no modern vehicle in sight for as far as he could see, even such floats as were there being horse-drawn.

The hour being close to twilight, many of the roisterers carried crude, homemade torches, while others carried lanterns of a decidedly old-fashioned kind.

He noticed these facts with mounting amazement, but he had no time to speculate on them, for at the moment he felt the tap of a fan on his shoulder, and, turning, found himself looking into the eyes of a strikingly beautiful girl, momentarily raising her mask so that he might see her.

"I've been looking for you," she said, mysteriously.

"Have you?" he answered for lack of anything else to say.

"You're late."

"I came as soon as I could," he answered, determined to play her game.

How beautiful she was. Creole, he

thought—certainly of mixed blood somewhere in her background. With black eyes like something alive and fathomless as a distant sea, soft, velvety skin, long, slender hands. Even in the ruffled and bustled costume she wore it was possible to recognize that her figure was superb. He forgot about the strangeness of the street on which they stood.

"Come," she said, and began to move swiftly away from him, darting in and out among the crowds.

His pulse quickened. "Wait for me," he called after her.

She turned her head briefly, and went on.

He started forward, determined to catch her. The old excitement of the chase filled him, and his only goal now was the pursuit, after which the conquest would surely be his. He did not stop to think who she might be; he had not recognized her face. He knew only that she was beautiful, far more than ordinarily so, that there was something haunting about her eyes and her mouth, that vaguely, deep, deep in his mind, there was a familiar echo, as if somehow, in a far past time, he had known the enchantment of loving a woman like her.

She wove in and out, fleetingly, light and graceful.

But try as he might, somehow he could not catch up to her. She remained always just in sight, and once or twice she paused, mockingly, as if to wait for him; but always she was gone, just as he came within easy speaking distance. He smiled, and his smile held.

In one way or another, in and out of Mardi Gras, he had done this a great many times—and almost always he had emerged the victor. There was no reason why he should not add this vixen to his list of conquests.

He redoubled his efforts.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the crowd thinned and was gone. They were alone in a side street, just the two of them, with her white dress six or seven doors ahead of him, and her mocking laughter drifting back in the warm air. Night had fallen, and no lights shone, but it did not matter; like a will-o-wisp she remained always just so far ahead of him, lighter and fleeter on her feet than he, and more sure of herself in the darkness, for once or twice he stumbled and almost fell.

He had no idea where he was; he did not care. His one thought was to catch up to the woman ahead of him; to find his way back would be a matter of moments, once the conquest had been accomplished.

QUITE suddenly she paused. She waited until he was almost up to her; then she turned into a dark, bush-girt lawn, running swiftly to a wide verandah, up the steps to a door, and into the house that stood there. She left the door standing ajar, which was a patent invitation.

He followed.

Inside, despite the darkness, he saw her vanishing into a dimly-lit room.

There, too, he followed.

Instantly, it seemed, the room was alight. The door was shut behind him; his quarry was over across the room. Before him and all around, even at his back, between him and the door, there were men—all in costume, the costume of pirates, clearly. But none was masked; and the domino was gone from the face of his quarry, also, as well as the smile.

For a moment the tableau held. Everyone looked at him with grim tenseness, as at an intruder whose intrusion must be punished.

He felt a brief, thin pricking of fear, but, of course, it was Mardi Gras, and people would understand. Or would they? There was something ominous in the tense quiet of the room.

He looked quickly around, his eyes searching for a familiar face. He saw none.

The tableau broke.

The circle closed around him, save for one arc directly before him, in the center of which sat a roughly dandified man wearing a smart black beard and mustache. He was toying with a short-barrelled pistol of some ancient manufacture. He gazed at Verneul with a mixture of indifference and contempt, which did not conceal his grimness.

"M. Verneul," he said, rather than asked.

"I am known," said Verneul, with a faint smile.

"Speak when you are spoken to," said his host curtly.

Verneul bridled. "Look here. I admit

to entering the house, at the indirect invitation of the young lady, but. . . ."

"M. Verneul has entered houses after young ladies before this, I think," drawled the seated gentleman. "And forced his attentions with and without permission upon a good many of those young ladies." He nodded toward someone standing at his side. "Will you read the charges, Mr. Ariman?"

"Whom have I the honor of addressing?" asked Verneul peremptorily.

There was a ripple of laughter. The seated gentleman rose and made a mocking bow. "Pray forgive me, sir," he said with an edge of unmistakable contempt in his voice. "I am Jean Lafitte, at your service."

His acting, thought Verneul, was startlingly real. "I am sure you will excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "But it is Mardi Gras and. . ."

"Hold your tongue," said Lafitte, and waved a hand to Ariman. "Read."

"On the sixth of February of last year, he accomplished the seduction of Claire Pechon, sixteen, against her will," read Ariman in a clear voice. "On the second of March, Mlle. Julie Argenton, with child by him, took her own life by drowning. On the eighteenth of April, he seduced Mme. Therese Munon, wife of Leon, who, discovering himself a cuckold, shot his wife and then himself. On the tenth of May, he deflowered Janise Bourgereau, seventeen."

VERNEUL wanted to shout his denial of the ridiculous account, but there was something puzzling, something shockingly confusing inside him. For, though he knew none of the women whose names were being read out with such solemnity, it was undeniable that as each name was read, there rose from some unknown depth of memory the picture of a woman's face, successively—of a sixteen year old girl, and one slightly older, of a married woman, of another girl—pictures which, in some remote corner of his mind, were recognizable. Words struggled to his lips, but they were not of denial.

"The prosecutor has forgotten the year of his charge," he said, as if by rote.

"Since this is 1811, the year must be 1810," said Lafitte. "You are more particular in this than ever you were about your victims, M. Verneul."

The confusion inside him increased to chaos. Was there two of him, then, that he could remember things which he knew had never taken place? And what was this of 1810 and 1811 now in this twentieth century?

"M. Verneul does not seem to understand that he is standing trial," said Lafitte.

"Trial?" echoed Verneul. "Gentlemen, I am in a fog. . . ."

"Indeed, indeed," murmured Lafitte. "A good ladies' man was never a good swordsman, and quicker to know fear than most men. You shall have justice, do not be alarmed. What have you to say in your defense?"

No words came. There were words deep inside him somewhere, but they could not find an outlet.

"Come, say—is it true that you have seduced young girls?"

He could not answer.

Lafitte turned to Ariman. "Put down that the prisoner has admitted it." And to Verneul once more. "And that you have persuaded silly married women to adultery?"

No answer.

"Once more, he assents. And now, M. Verneul, is it not true also that on the seventh day of this very month you attacked and ravaged Elise Gautier, my ward?" Lafitte flung his arm out to indicate the woman who, but so short a time gone by, had been his eagerly-desired quarry.

He wanted to say that he had never seen her before in his life; but he could not be sure. It seemed to him that memory of her lingered, but from what source? He could not say; he did not know. How had he come here? The woman, yes—but how had it happened? Part of him recalled the unlit streets and thought them natural; but part thought them wrong, knew them wrong. What was happening to him? What fantastic conspiracy was this?

Lafitte had stood up. "M. Paul Verneul, will you hear your sentence?"

He wanted to say, "My name is Alan, Alan Paul," but nothing came from his lips; and indeed, at the moment he could not be sure that anything at all came from any tongue or throat; for he had cast down his

eyes, and seen not floor, but long grass, and an edge of stone, as of a stone box of some kind.

". . . To be shot," Lafitte was saying. "Now."

Instantly half a dozen of the old-fashioned pistols were leveled at him, cocked and ready.

"Aim," said Lafitte to the widening circle.

VERNEUL stood as if paralyzed. If only he could know! Which was the dream—this or that other? Which was the reality—that distant world in which he was a counselor, or this world of the dandy of New Orleans in 1811? Which, indeed!

"Fire!" said Lafitte.

There was a round of blasts. Briefly, the world of Alan Verneul was a turbulence of strange, smoky blue.

They found him in a long-abandoned cemetery in the outlying country south of New Orleans, though still within the city limits. Dead. By what means, none could say. There were some half a dozen bluish marks on his flesh, as if bullets had gone into him; but no skin was broken. In the course of the inquiry, it was discovered that Verneul had been seen rushing madly through the Mardi Gras crowds in pursuit of someone no one had been able to see; that he had been observed by a passer-by in the cemetery, standing quite alone, talking and gesticulating so that his observer thought him drunk and went on; that the cemetery stood on the site of an old house once the property of Désiré Gautier; that the house, according to legend, was the scene of the fatal shooting of an ancestor of Verneul's more than a century ago.

When he was found, Verneul still wore the blue spectacles.

Since Alain Verneil was curator of the city museum, he saw and recognized their value. And in good time, he got around to adding them to his collection, thus accomplishing Jesse Brennan's original intention.

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How Strange My Love

By Russell Branch

OH, TEDDY why did you lie to me? Such a needless little lie, and it doesn't really matter. Except the not knowing and needing you so. I'm shivering, Teddy, and frightened. So terribly frightened. . . .

I'm here, you little fool. Out here in the garden—where your tulips will bloom this spring. Lying on the cold hard dirt, Sally, with a bullet through my lung. *Your* bullet, my utterly stupid, my incredibly lucky little wife. The bullet you fired so wildly into the night, with your hand shaking and your eyes closed blindly. . .

Teddy, my love, I need you so. The police are coming but it's you I need. The shelter of your arms, the warmth of your chin against my head. Come home, Teddy, and hold me tight. Like you did that first, wonderful night on the Caribbee. . . .

Out here, stupid! Out here watching and hating you, with the blood choking in my throat. I know you've called the police; I saw you go to the phone. Then you remembered the window shade . . . as if you could shut out your terror with that flimsy fabric! I can still see you, my ugly duckling. Your shadow. Pacing, turning, rubbing your wrist with that maddening, foolish gesture of yours.

I wish now I'd done it while I had the chance . . . in fact, that very first night, aboard the Caribbee. I wish I'd put my hands around your throat, Sally, instead of around your waist.

You remember, Teddy? You held me close and you whispered in my ear, "Let me call you my darling. . . ."

Moonlight and music . some corny popular song that drifted up from the deck

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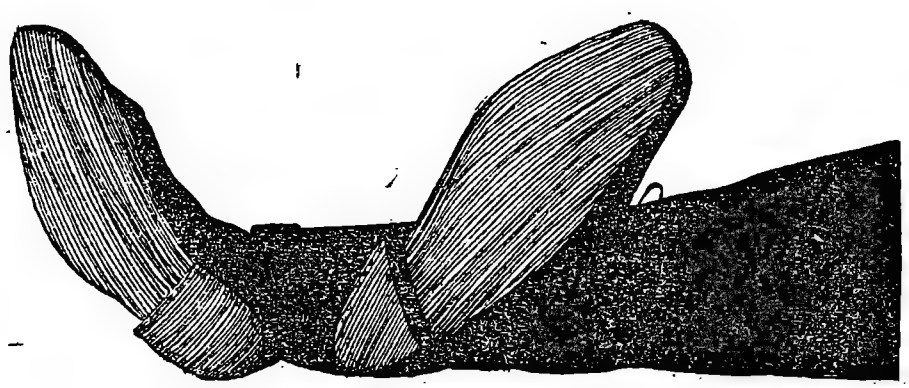
And how strange the intensity of hate
that knows no bounds but fate itself



Heading by
Vincent Napoli

below. We'd given up dancing—you never could dance, my clumsy dumpling—and you giggled like a schoolgirl when I led you up the companionway to the hurricane deck. You kissed like a schoolgirl, too . . awkward, timid, inept. I should have known then it wouldn't be worth it.

You'll never know what you gave me, Teddy. The strength—the courage and ecstasy and self-forgetting that comes to a girl when she knows she's wanted, and makes her a woman. The first time for me, darling, and even though I knew it wasn't for you it didn't matter. That was part of it, my dear: the knowing that you, a man of the world, had chosen me.

I know how I must have seemed to you, Teddy; a mere girl. But I was a woman when we finally went below, a woman with moonglow in her face and stardust in her eyes. I could feel them there, Teddy, and I remember how sharply Daddy looked at me when we came into the bright lights of the card saloon. . . .

YOU were always such a fool, Sally, such a stupid little dope. That very first night you almost gave the whole show away, like a child with a secret. After all, it had only been a kiss or two, but you looked as if. . Well, your father saw that look, and I knew I had to work fast.

But Daddy didn't understand, no more than he could ever understand. "It's your bedtime, young lady," he told me, just as if I were still a child. But it didn't matter, because you smiled understandingly at me, Teddy; smiled and bowed and kissed my hand, right there in front of all those people, and I went below to my stateroom with a whole new set of dreams.

Your old man wasn't dumb, my obvious one. He packed you off to bed, and he invited me to have a nightcap with him in the bar, and I knew what was on his mind. . .

"Your business, Mr. LeClair? . . . You say your family home's in Florida?"

But he didn't ask those questions, my sweet; I hit him first:

"Mr. Gresham, I think I've fallen in love with your daughter."

That took the wind out of his pompous belly, I tell you, and it was really funny. Bernard L. Gresham—Mr. BLG, Incorporated, in person—looking like he'd gotten hold of a very hot potato and didn't know quite how to put it down.

But what the hell, that'd been the main idea of the cruise to begin with, hadn't it? A husband for the poor little rich girl, a suitable mate for the ugly duckling?

Always such a bear, Daddy was—a nice but clumsy bear. "We'll take a cruise to Havana, Sally. A vacation for me and a nice change for you. It'll put roses in your cheeks, and who knows? Maybe some nice young man. ."

Sure, I knew what your father thought of me. Not quite what he had in mind. Not the nice dull Harvard boy, the Long Island banker's son, he'd hoped for. A bit too old, Mr. LeClair, a bit too smooth, for my little innocent. . . A bit too smooth for himself, as a matter of fact.

He let me pay for the drinks; I think he hoped to embarrass me. If he'd only known about that bill I handed the bar steward . . the last of a beautiful friendship with a not-so-beautiful widow who had also come to Havana seeking romance, and the reason I'd had to leave so suddenly. . . .

You were so charming, Teddy. So sophisticated and so different from the boys I'd known before. I knew Daddy didn't like you; he was afraid of that sophistication, afraid I'd get hurt.

But how could I have been hurt—even

if it had ended with those two glorious days and nights? I was like a person who had lived her whole life in a dark cave, and now had seen the sun for the very first time.

Yes, your old man was really funny, Sally. Afraid of me—and at the same time afraid that it was just a passing flirtation with me. Afraid that it'd be a quick goodbye and a broken heart when we reached New York; afraid it wouldn't be. But I knew a good thing when I saw it, Sally, so it wasn't goodbye when we landed. And that's when he really began to worry, that wealthy, fat-headed parent of yours.

I admit I had a black moment, darling, when I had to say goodbye at the pier. Because this was no longer sun and moonshine and a little intoxicated world of its own; this was New York with a cold wind and dirt and traffic and a lonely apartment waiting on Central Park West.

But you put the sun back in the sky, Teddy. You said, "Not goodbye, but au revoir, darling," and you kissed me quickly, while poor Daddy stood by and growled helplessly in his throat, looking embarrassed.

And then you sent flowers, Teddy, just two beautiful long-stemmed roses . . . so simple, so understanding. And the next afternoon. . . . I was hoping you'd come, Teddy, hoping against all hope. . . .

Oh, I played it smart. I had to play it smart; my money was running out.

We had such fun, darling, such wonderful crazy fun. You were so romantic. .

God, how I loathed it.

A gardenia for the girl-friend? Remember?

The quaint little restaurant, lousy with atmosphere and lousy with the food.

The walks in the Park. .

"Darling, I have tickets for the theatre tonight . . . but why should I share you with others?" What a line!

But we told Daddy that we were going. . . .

"Tonight is ours, Sally. There'll never be another night just like this one."

You'd come in a car; a funny old car you'd borrowed from some friend, and you were so mysterious. . . .

I had to work fast, my chick, and I did. I was down to my last twenty when I rented that car.

And you wouldn't tell me where we were going, but we drove and drove, far out of the city.

. . . To get us to that place in Maryland, that little town where you can get married without a wait, without questions.

I was frightened then, Teddy. I thought of poor Father and then I stopped thinking, because you were kissing me again. And we had our first little spat that night, our first married quarrel, because I kept worrying about Daddy. But I couldn't help it, Teddy. I couldn't forget how he sounded—angry and disappointed and sort of defeated—when I phoned him right after the justice of peace.

YOU wanted to go right home the next morning, baby, and it was all right with me. I had to get that rented car back, and I had to face the music sometime, so I figured it might as well be while the old boy was still groggy from the shock. . . .

That was the only flaw in my perfect happiness—seeing how upset Daddy was. He looked so old and so tired when he told me: "Sally, all I care about is your happiness. You know that, and I only hope you realize what you've done."

I don't know what Pop told you that morning, Sally, but he sure dished it out to me when he got me alone in his library. He wasn't exactly dumb, you know; most guys who make a fortune aren't. But he did underestimate me, my love; I think he had some idea he could pay me off in peanuts, after all my planning. I *told* him.

"Mr. Gresham, you're quite right. I haven't got a sou. But it seems to me that you—a man who started with nothing himself—should be the last to condemn me for that. All I ask is a chance, any chance."

Later, I remembered again what Daddy told me that day. That I had married you without really knowing a thing about you or your background—a stranger.

But I wonder if marriage isn't always a marriage of strangers? I don't mean the little things you have to find out, like personal habits and moods and how you like your breakfast egg. But the big thing: the person behind the shell you can never know,

the person who grew up and lived a stranger's life until you met. How well I remember that ghastly feeling when you told me about your brother for the first time. . . .

And you were impatient, Teddy—almost cruel at times, although you didn't realize it. But I loved you, darling, and I made allowances. I knew you were working hard to prove yourself to Dad, and how hard it was, in a job so far beneath your ability and interests. .

Yes, Poppa came through, that generous father of yours. He gave me a job—as a salesman in the field where being the boss's son-in-law would not be a "handicap," as he put it. He even let you keep your charge accounts—for clothes—and he paid a cleaning woman to come in so that you wouldn't have to work so hard.

Generous? Yeah, just as generous as the 6 per cent mortgage he floated so we could buy this little dump. But he didn't scare me out, Sally. I gritted my teeth and kept on ringing doorbells and putting up with your incredible cooking efforts. . . .

I tried so hard, Teddy—if you only knew. All I wanted was your love, darling, and for that I worked as I never had worked before. I could take your criticism, your sarcasm, your temper, Teddy. . . I could take everything but that feeling of strangeness, that feeling of knowing only a small part of you, with the rest all hidden behind some dark shadow. And I was so glad when you finally told me about your brother, because then I felt I was beginning to understand at last.

I HAD intended to wait longer, Sally, before I gave you that business about my brother. But you gave me the perfect opening, and it was too good to pass up. I mean when you brought up the subject of having children, raising a family. Made to order: the perfect opening for the perfect answer.

So I told you then, just three months after we were married. I told you all about poor Hugo, my pitiful, demented twin brother.

Oh, you poor, poor darling—with that behind you. Of course I understood how you felt; and that was all that really mattered, although naturally I was disappointed too. I felt at last I knew what had been eating your soul; I could see that it would be like living with some terrible shadow. And worse still, a shadow in your own image. . .

I guess I must have made it good, really good. You almost had me weeping myself, Sally. . . .

I'll never forget the look in your eyes when you told me, never. A haunted look, as if you could never hope to escape it but were relieved anyway to have it out. You told me how he had escaped, how he hated you with all the consuming hatred of insanity, about that threat he had screamed at you in court when you had him committed. . .

I made it good, Sally. Plenty good. Scared the daylights out of you. You thought you knew now why I jumped at sudden noises, the reason for the quick glances toward the window in the evenings.

I wasn't frightened at first, not physically. Just relieved that you finally told me about poor Hugo, and glad that I could share your trouble with you. But I gradually came to share your nervousness, too, and the fear that you tried to hide from me. And that afternoon when the first telephone call came. . . .

I let that go on for two weeks, sweet—until you were jumpy as a cat. The telephone was pure inspiration—and pure accident. You were outside, that Sunday afternoon, fooling around in this same garden bed, and I was dozing over the Sunday paper when the phone rang.

I answered it, and it was the wrong number, but I saw you hurrying toward the back door as if you hoped to get it before it rang again and woke me up. So I just kept on talking, Sally—talking with my finger holding the hook down. I knew you had stopped in the kitchen; I knew you were listening.

And when I hung up, and you came in with your eyes wide and fearful, I told you it had only been a wrong number. But you didn't believe me, Sally. You saw what you were afraid to see in my face. You were sure it had been Hugo—and the more I denied it, the more you believed it.

You tried so hard to shield me, Teddy, when you found that Hugo had traced you down. You tried to reassure me; you told me that Hugo could never locate you here,

that the police would catch him first. Yes, you were a darling, Teddy . . but I knew it wasn't fear of burglars that led you to have double locks installed on the doors . . . and apply to the police for a pistol permit.

The gun was another inspiration, my love. The police. . . I wonder if it'll be that same pompous lieutenant we told our story to that afternoon when we got the permit? The one who came out the night your old man cashed in his chips for good?

You never knew it, darling—but I did my share of the shielding too. I got a phone call myself, a call that came just before you arrived home one evening. You were a little late, as a matter of fact . and I talked to your brother that time. It was horrible. He . . . well, he sounded like you in a way, and I could almost picture his face, so much like yours I knew. Except for that note in his voice—that brutal, threatening incoherence.

That was why my face was so white, Teddy; that was why I was relieved to the point of tears when I finally heard your key in the lock that evening. I couldn't talk to him, couldn't reason with him, but I could feel it. He hated you, Teddy; you and everything that was yours. . .

Pace, damn you, back and forth, wringing your foolish hands. I can't see your face, but it must look now like it did that night I phoned you on my way home from work. You were one mighty sick-looking rabbit that night, Sally, and you had me worried for a moment, too, when you refused to talk about it. But then I got it. You were just being noble, keeping your worry to yourself, the stiff upper lip. It stuck out all over you.

I had to talk to someone, darling. I was so glad when I finally got up the courage to tell Daddy about it, even though I knew you didn't want me to. And Daddy was so understanding and sympathetic, Teddy; really he was. He had begun to change his mind about you—even though you never gave him much leeway. He told me that you'd done a good job at selling, even though you obviously disliked it, and he'd already decided to bring you into the home office at the first vacancy.

He did that the very next day, Teddy, the day after I told him about Hugo—because it meant you wouldn't have to be away from home so much. . . .

YOUR old man began to come around about that time, Sally. He transferred me into the office, gave me a wage boost, even pulled the man-to-man stuff in an effort to find out more about my poor crazy brother. I knew then that you'd gone to him, pet—but I didn't yield an inch. Told him there was nothing he could do about my own family troubles, and thanks for the promotion.

And that promotion! I wanted to toss it in his fat face, and walk out on both of you. But I didn't. I'd stood it this far and I wasn't going to spoil everything I'd so carefully built up. One more little piece of business, and then. . . .

Oh, Teddy, I lived in fear those days. Those horrible long days that went on and on like nightmares while you were away. Alone in this house, nerves jumping every time the phone rang, forcing myself to go outside long enough to hang up the wash, trembling when the postman or the laundry man came to the door.

I wanted to move back into the city then so desperately, dear; back to an apartment where there would always be people around. But you said no, that we couldn't live our whole lives trying to hide, and I knew you were right. . .

Until that horrible day when I went out to take some old newspapers to the garage.

Really a nice piece of acting, that garage business was, my dear. Not to mention perfect psychology.

I saw him then! A shadow in the corner of the garage. He looked so much like you, Teddy; in fact my first reaction. . . .

You thought at first it was I, honey child. You started to say, "Teddy! What on earth—" Then you put your fist to your mouth. I could see the wheels going around: Teddy isn't home. Teddy's at the office. This isn't Teddy, this. . . .

When he turned, I knew. He turned slowly, clumsily, not with that quick grace of yours. And his face—as if it had come from the same mold, but had warped horribly. His blank eyes . he just stared, Teddy, stared at me like a trapped wild ani-

mal, with his face full of blind hatred. He took one step. . . . I don't remember. I think I must have screamed. I couldn't move, I may have fainted for a second. . . .

You screamed, baby—and closed your eyes, like you always do when you're frightened. I could have finished you then. . . . God knows, I wanted to. I wanted to choke that hysterical screaming off, force your eyes open so that you could look into mine at the last moment and know. But I didn't, Sally. Not then, not yet. .

When I came to he was gone, Teddy. I got myself into the house, somehow; I locked the doors, and found the pistol in your dresser. I remember I was shaking so I couldn't even dial, had to ask the operator to get your number. And when the girl at the office told me you'd already gone, that she thought you were on your way home. . . .

Perfect psychology, my dear. Out of those old clothes I'd appropriated from someone's rubbish barrel; back into my own, down in that old hobo camp under the culvert. Then around the block, up to my front door. Mr. LeClair, home a little early from work. The thoughtful husband, the intuitive husband—home early because of a hunch that something was wrong. Yes, home to his hysterical, stupid little wife. . . .

Darling, darling, you'll never know! When you came in, gathered up the pieces in your strong arms even before you knew what had happened. Because somehow you did know . and there you were, my strength and my courage and my protector!

Like pulling strings on a puppet; that simple. I went through all the motions; took the gun out of your limp hand and went out back and searched all around. Listened to your incoherent tale, called the police with a few embellishments of my own. . .

Then the police came, even as they will come now. But it's you I'm waiting for, Teddy. I won't feel really safe again until you hold me close once more, tell me it's all right. . . .

I got a big laugh out of that, too. That detective—Conneley? No, Conover. Lieutenant Conover, that's it. Fixed me with his wise eyes and said, "Mr. LeClair, we'll need an exact description of your brother."

And I grinned and said, "Lieutenant, you're looking at one right now. We're identical twins, and even our own mother. . . ."

That was when you raised the roof, my darling—with your indignant protest that we were really nothing alike, not at all. Because you had *seen* Hugo. . . .

I had the strangest sensation that day, Teddy—of course it was nothing but sheer nerves, reaction. I was lying there on the couch, and you were talking to the police officer, and it suddenly seemed to me that I was looking at two people in one: the wonderful man I had married—and another one who called himself Hugo. And when you grinned that self-mocking, that cynical, grin and told the lieutenant that your brother looked exactly like you . . well, it was almost as if you had read my thoughts.

SURE, the cops poked around and found nothing and promised that they'd send out a general alarm. I knew then that the time would never be any riper, so I called your father, right after they left.

I knew why Daddy came over that evening, Teddy dear; I knew it was because you had called him. You were just trying to spare me, darling, and don't think—never think—that I blame you for what happened. I know that you've always blamed yourself, but don't, dearest. After all, I kept him here; I argued and protested and refused to go home with him unless you'd come too. . . .

So dear poppa comes rushing over in his limousine to rescue poor little frightened daughter, and there we all were, sitting around and arguing about it. . . .

You were so troubled, darling; so upset and stubborn and self-recriminating for having gotten me involved—and so very decided about handling your own "problem" as you called it. Daddy wanted to call in a private detective agency, but you just shook your head savagely and took out that pistol and showed it to him grimly.

"He's my own brother, Mr. Gresham. And if he's a dangerous maniac—then I'm the one to deal with him, one way or another."

You had just said that, Teddy—when I saw a look come into your face that frightened me even more than your grimness. You

suddenly leaned forward, staring past us, looking at the window beyond the couch. And then, before we could even turn, you were on your feet, running toward the front door with the pistol in your hand. . .

That was when I made my last big play . . . right then, when we were talking about it. They watched me go, my startled wife and old Money Bags, and they did just what I expected. .

Yeah, I'll have to give the old boy credit. He wasn't a coward. He rushed right after me, just as I figured and hoped he would, and I let him have it just as he stepped out the door. He never knew what hit him; he was still blinking into the darkness when the shots blasted into him. Three, I think—just as fast as I could work that old revolver I'd bought at a pawnshop. .

I died a thousand deaths that night, dearest one, while the guns roared outside. I don't know how I finally made it, how I ever got my feet to move me to the door. I saw the crumpled heap on the steps; my mind screamed that it was you even as I knew it wasn't. Because you were running back from the darkness then, running up the front walk to take me into your arms. . . .

So I came back, from chasing my own shadow down the street, my sweet, and you were already at the front door. Standing there looking down at your father's body, and sobbing my name. I'd done a good job, I saw as I bent over him. He was gone already; gone beyond all help and all speech.

I felt so guilty about it afterwards, Teddy. . . . I didn't realize then that my own father had been killed, I just felt a stunned relief that it wasn't you lying there. You were alive, Teddy, alive but wounded. .

That was all there was to it, my love. Just you and me. Me, your dutiful, brave husband, with a bullet nick in his shoulder. . . .

I didn't realize about Daddy until later—not until the police came, and the ambulance, and they started taking pictures and measuring things.

THAT shoulder of mine hurt like hell; but it was worth it. With that, and all the rest of the buildup, how could they suspect anything? You had actually seen Hugo—and then there was that helpful neighbor down the street who was sure he had seen someone running away right after the shooting.

They found the other gun, of course: the old revolver I had tossed into the bushes while I was so bravely chasing the insane brother who had missed me and had killed my father-in-law.

They arrested the pawnbroker and he admitted he had sold the gun . . but to a shabby tramp, not a gentleman like that Mr. LeClair. And they took paraffine tests of my hand, sure but all that proved was what my own emptied pistol already showed, that I had tried my best even if it had been my own blood brother.

They found out more about Hugo, of course. That a man named Hugo LeClair had once been committed, but had escaped three years ago, from a private sanitarium near New Orleans; that his papers had been signed by a brother named Theodore who subsequently had disappeared to escape local gossip and the tragic past. . . .

In short, my dear, they found everything —and nothing.

Or, I thought it was all over then, Teddy; I thought our troubles were over and I tried to believe you. You explained to me how people who were legally insane could still be surprisingly rational and clever; that Hugo would never dare show up again, even if the police didn't locate him. I thought . . I hoped . until tonight. . . .

So there it was, my love. Nothing left but you and a half-million dollars—after taxes. I knew it would take a year to get the will settled but I also knew what was in *your* will, my angel, and I could wait. . . .

Until tonight, at the window again. . . .

I *thought* I could wait; I was willing to wait. Theodore could have waited, damn him! But Theodore was dead; Hugo had killed him long before he found you. And Hugo had to come back once more, and spoil everything because Hugo couldn't . . . wait. . . .

Darling, darling Teddy! Where . . . where are you?

Come out . Sally. Out in the garden, Sally . come out . . . see Hugo. Poor, crazy Hugo with . . . the hole . . . in . . . his chest.

The Ubiquitous Professor Karr

BY STANTON A. COBLENTZ

A blameless man, the Professor . . . everybody thought!

"WHAT would you say, Chief, was your most baffling experience in all your years with the force?"

Larry Finch, until recently Chief of Police in our home town of Coleton, leaned back among the amply upholstered pillows of the Antelope Club. His square, ruddy face, marked by the bald head, the pugnose, and the little blue-gray eyes that squinted shrewdly from above their wrinkles of fat, wore a sort of vague, tantalizing smile.

"Well, you know, boys," said he, while the four or five of us gathered closer on the club chairs and sofas, "nobody can hold down a job like mine for thirty years without having some hard nuts to crack. Just the same, I don't think any case ever came to near driving me crazy as the Emerson J. Karr affair. It had elements in it that went way beyond a regular police case. In fact, I can't say I understand it entirely even now. Any of you fellows remember Emerson J. Karr?"

"Seems to me there was something about him once in the papers, wasn't there, Chief?" I asked, for the name did strike a faint echo.

"You bet there was!" Finch affirmed, as he knocked out the ashes from a fat cigar. "However, that was all of twenty years back —yes, nearer twenty-five. Emerson J. Karr

Heading by Matt Fox

was a pretty well-known man in his field. He was the head of the Department of Sanskrit at Newlands University, and he'd written some highbrow books and made some translations that they say were in every college library. All in all, he was about the last man you'd ever have connected with organized crime."

"Organized crime?" several of us gasped; while, leaving our Martinis half-finished, we leaned closer in tingling excitement.

"If you'd ever seen the guy," went on the Chief, after he had slipped down the remains of his Old-fashioned and taken another puff or two at his cigar, "you'd have expected him to be as proper as a parson. He was a sort of walking beanpole, with a huge head perched on top. I never saw another such a head; it looked big enough for two, a monstrous bald bulb, with great yellowish teeth, like a hallowe'en goblin's, and two pale green eyes that seemed to stare out at you from some sort of a dream-world of his own. His face was always pasty-pale, and the big Adam's apple on his thick neck wobbled up and down, but what made him look queerest of all was a long twisted gray scar running down from the left corner of his lips."

"Not exactly a beauty, was he?" remarked Fred Mayfield, from over my shoulder.

"BELIEVE me, he wasn't! Maybe that was one reason no woman had ever taken to him. He was sixty-one or two, and had never married; lived with his eighty-three-year-old mother in a dilapidated two-story house in the suburbs. At the college he was a sort of an institution, having been at the place longer than most folks could remember; everybody respected him, but he was the sort of guy that has a crowd of acquaintances and no friends. His habits were as regular as a monk's; he never went out anywhere, and I doubt if he'd been seen for years anywhere much except on the half-mile stretch between his home and the campus. A story went the rounds that you could set your watch by his goings and comings, and I believe it, too—which was why I just couldn't take it seriously when the reports seemed to connect him with the Nich Rocco gang."

"Nich Rocco gang?" I burst forth. "Wasn't that the one that—"

"Yes sirree, worst gang this part of the country ever saw. Sure did more than anything else to turn me gray," stated Finch, with a growl, as his fingers ranged over the few grizzled hairs that remained at the sides of his head. "Their specialty was robbing safes in banks, stores and factories, and they got away with so many crack-ups they took to leaving a big R, painted in red, out of sheer bravado whenever they finished a job. I tell you it was maddening, and for a while it looked like I'd lose my own job if I couldn't outwit them. Just about this time, Emerson J. Karr began to stick his nose into things."

"What could Emerson J. Karr have to do with a thug like Nich Rocco?"

"That's the question that worried us all. When the first stories began coming in, I called them pipe dreams. I remember when Officer Pete Kelly, who was pretty new on the force, said he saw Professor Karr standing on the street, just in front of the Seaboard National Bank at 3 a.m., right before its safes were blown open. He swore he knew Karr by sight, because his first assignment had been to the University beat. But he couldn't tell me what in blazes a man like Karr would be doing at 3 a.m. at the Seaboard National Bank."

"Simply doesn't seem reasonable," muttered Joe Tracy, just to my left.

"You're telling me, are you? But just as sure as I'm a man, and not a monkey, I didn't feel quite so positive two days later, when I heard from Captain O'Donnell, one of our veterans. He rushed with a squad of men down to the Coddings Lumber Mills right after the alarm came in. They almost nabbed two of the crooks, but they got away somehow over a fence, and he swore one of them was a tall rambling stake of a fellow, with a huge head and a big Adam's apple, and a twisted gray scar running down from the left corner of his lips."

"Must have been Karr's double," I suggested. "I've sometimes seen two men look so much alike you could take them for twin brothers."

The Chief leaned far forward in his chair, while one pudgy hand fondled his bony chin

"Tell the truth, I thought it was something like that, too. Even the detail of the scar—after all, in his excitement, a man mightn't really see what he thinks he sees. So I let things rest for another week, until Officers Muzzio and Olsen—two men I really trusted—described a fellow with exactly the same features, who'd been seen running away after a street robbery."

"If he was seen so often," I argued, "I should think he'd have been caught."

FINCH shook his great square head ruefully; his face seemed even redder than usual by the light of the overhead lamps.

"That was just what puzzled us most of all. Before the month was up, he was reported again four or five times. More than once the boys came within an inch of getting him, but suddenly he would slip away —whisk around corners, or through windows or over walls, they couldn't ever explain just how, except that he was gone like a shot."

"Sounds weird to me."

"Weird? Wait till you hear the rest! Of course, being pretty hard-boiled, none of us supposed we were up against anything but a specially clever crook. I know I expected to clear up the mystery the day I went to visit Professor Karr. I didn't think any dry-as-dust bookworm could put anything over on me. But I still had some things to learn. Believe me, I had some things to learn."

The Chief called for a second Old-fashioned; and having hastily consumed it, went on on a wry, hesitant manner.

"You know, boys, I'm not a guy that embarrasses easy—couldn't, in my line of work, if I wanted to get along. Just the same, I was like a school kid reciting his first piece when I let myself in there with the professor. I'd trumped up some sort of phony excuse, about maybe wanting him to appear as a witness—it was still a police secret what about. He was so damned polite you would have thought I was the King of England: 'Won't you kindly step in, Officer,' 'Make yourself comfortable, Officer,' and that kind of junk, all in a deep burring bass you'd never forget. He led me upstairs to his study, which was lined with books from floor to ceiling—God, I don't see how any man could ever read all that stuff. I sure began hemming and hawing, when I found myself opposite his desk, where he had a portable typewriter open; he looked at me with such a peculiar steady stare of those big round pale-green eyes that I sort of felt I was the one that was under inspection. However, I did manage to jerk my questions out.

" 'Professor, do you remember where you were last Thursday night?'

"He didn't give even a second's thought. 'Thursday—why, yes, Thursday I remember being busy all evening writing my paper on 'Some Aspects of the Philosophy of Sankara' for *The International Scholar.*'

"Anyway, I think that was what he said, and it had me sort of stumped, so I went on to ask, 'And Tuesday evening?'

"There still wasn't the faintest hesitation as he answered, 'Why, yes, Tuesday evening —Tuesday evening I always prepare my lecture for my advanced course on the Sutras of Patan—Patanjali, I guess it was, or something like that anyway.

"Believe me, boys, that had me cornered. He answered every other question right off, too; let out he hadn't been away from home any evening the whole blasted month. What's more, he looked so damned honest I couldn't in my heart believe he was lying, especially as his story was confirmed by his mother. She was a birdlike lovely little thing, with such clear blue eyes that looked you straight in the face you felt like a louse for having any suspicions. This lady—she didn't look at all like eighty-three—came in at about nine with a pot of tea. 'Emerson always has his tea at this time,' she said. 'Won't you join us, Officer?' Just imagine, boys, me having tea! Just the same, you have to submit to pretty near anything in my line, so I took it with a perfectly smooth face.

"Got the mother to chat, too; said, 'Well, Ma'am, what does your son do about his tea the evenings when he's out?'

" 'Oh, but he's never out!' she answered. 'Why, I don't believe Emerson's been away one evening since he gave his lectures over to Clinton College, a year ago last May.'

"I've interviewed lots of men and women in my day, boys, and caught 'em in packs of lies, but I'd have staked my reputation there wasn't even the chance of a lie in the pure

sweet eyes of that old lady. No, somehow we'd made a dreadful mistake.

"I stuck around a while after the mother went out, just for the sake of appearances, while the professor showed me some of the books he'd written. There was some hifalutin thing, a study of some old Hindu poem or other, and others with jaw-cracking names, I don't even begin to know what about. That was why it gave me a whale of a surprise, as I was leaving, to see a strip of gaudy color peeping out at me from under a pile of highbrow magazines on the rack. Jerking it out, I sure got a shock to see a copy of 'Stirring Crime Stories.'

"I GAVE a low whistle, and could see the professor's face going from white to red. 'Lord bless me, but I'm getting careless!' he burst out, looking like a schoolboy who's been caught red-handed stealing something. 'Please push it back, Officer, so my mother won't see it. I wouldn't have her know—you see, in my work, I sometimes need relief from tension, and have been finding it of late in crime and detective stories. Of course, it's only a sowing of intellectual wild oats, so if you'll just help me keep it from Mother—'

"I knew that brainy men sometimes did turn to blood-and-thunder thrillers so as to sort of let off steam. Still, I wondered if I mightn't be running into a clue. But before I had time to ask questions, somebody rapped at the door, and a lean tall man with a black face and black moustache and hair came in and took the professor's hand in a familiar sort of way. 'Officer, meet my friend Mr. Rasmani,' he introduced us. 'He used to be my student, but I'm his student now; he's instructing me in the practice of Yogi.'

"This was a little beyond my depth, and I was getting uncomfortable as hell in the presence of that Hindu, who gave me a look that seemed to go through me like a bullet. So I snatched my cap and left. God! but was I glad to be out of that house!"

The Chief reached for another cigar, and passed half a minute in lighting it.

"Well, I don't see that you were getting anywhere," I filled in the interval. "You came away without any evidence, so far as I can see."

"So far as I could see, either," Finch resumed, sitting back with a smile as of one who enjoys a good joke on himself. "Just try to imagine how befuddled I was when a call came that very night. The Firestone Jewelers had been robbed at 2:30, and the same walking beanpole, who resembled the professor even to the scar under his lips, had been seen directing the robbers just before they made their get-away."

"Well, my theory," contributed Fred Mayfield, "is that it was a case of split or dissociated personality. You've heard, haven't you, of men with a sort of Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde division inside themselves, so that they act like two men, one of whom doesn't know what the other is doing. Thus, old Karr might have been chumming with gangsters part of the time, without his normal self having any notion of the crimes."

"Well, don't you ever think we overlooked that bet, boys. In fact, it was the only theory that looked halfway sound. If Karr really was a divided personality, maybe he did go out nights and get mixed up with thugs. On that supposition, I set two plain-clothes men to guarding the house every night, hiding in the shrubbery so that no one could come or go without their knowing. But for the next three nights, nothing happened. It looked like the Rocco gang was laying low. Then, on the fourth night, it was the old story again. Hawley's Cash Market, down on Main Street, had been broken into, and several hundred dollars taken from the tray. Two guys who happened to be passing just before the crime took place, said they'd seen a tall, lean man with a huge head, tortise-shell glasses and a scarred lip, prowling in front of the Market. But Officers Ryan and Benton, who'd been guarding Karr's house, swore a blue streak nobody could have possibly left.

"I gave special orders then for the boys to concentrate on that skinny daredevil. Whoever he was, Karr or his twin brother, we'd have to catch him damned quick. Well, can you believe it, it was just like he was playing with us all. He kept on being reported, and was almost caught time after time. Take what happened to Patrolman Pat Mulligan. 'Sure, an' the dirty loafer was hangin' roun' Jefferson Square at two in the mornin',' Pat reported. 'Well, muh

boy, ye'll come with me,' he said, and reached out to handcuff the fellow. 'By the Holy Mother, Chief,' he swore, 'ye'll think I'm dreamin', but when I stuck my hand out he just wasn't there no more. I say there's somethin' spooky about it, Chief. Sure looks like he's been a-flirtin' with the Evil One.'

" 'Mulligan,' I answered, severely, 'looks like you've been flirting with the bottle. You'll have to steer clear of it when you're on duty, if you want to stay with the force.'

"Just the same, I knew Mulligan wasn't much of a boozer. I was all the more knocked off kilter since there'd been a big fur theft at Jefferson Square sometime between two and two thirty that morning. A few nights later I was still befuddled when Officer Kelley, along with Swensen and McGrath, reported they'd cornered Professor Karr right at the entrance of the blind alley leading from East Fifth Street toward the Athens Grill. 'Take my word for it, Chief, I knew him, all right!' Kelley insisted. 'We came across him just under the street lamp, and there was that funny green light coming from his big goggle eyes—I'd have known him in a million.' The boys held back from shooting; had orders not to fire unless it was necessary, and this time it didn't seem necessary, as they ran him down that blind alley, with no way of escaping except over a ten-story brick wall. But when they got to the end of the alley, there wasn't a sign of him. Not one deuced sign! All three of them swore he couldn't have gotten out by any natural means. Later that night, the Athens Grill was robbed of nine hundred dollars."

"Were you still keeping guard around Karr's house?"

THE CHIEF nodded. He sat back in his chair; blew out several hearty mouthfuls of cigar smoke; and waited a moment, while the rest of us inched nearer.

"Of course, we kept guard, never skipping a night. But the boys said the professor never went out any evening—went to bed at 10:30, regular as the clock. They could see him snapping on his bedroom light; then winding his watch and the clock, then pulling the covers back on his bed, then drawing the blinds, and finally putting the light out—all done so damned methodically it didn't look like one night was a hair's breadth different from the next."

"Well, maybe that was only a ruse, to put you off the track," conjectured Joe Tracy. "Maybe he sneaked out later at night."

"We didn't overlook that bet, either, even if it wasn't easy to see how he could get by the boys. One morning at about one o'clock, I called his number. When he answered, which he did only after a long time, he sounded drowsy as the devil, but I couldn't help recognizing that burring bass of his. 'Is this Elliott 2539?' I barked into the receiver, purposely giving the wrong number. 'No, damn you, it's 2598!' he growled back at me; and I was a little surprised to learn he could swear. 'What d'ye mean, waking a man this hour of the night?' As I heard the receiver slam back into place, I was more baffled than ever.

"But that wasn't anything to the way I was mystified half an hour later, when I got a call about a robbery in the Atlas Plating Mills. Professor Karr had been seen by two of the boys as they dashed down to the scene, but he'd gotten round the side of a building and escaped."

"Well, wasn't it possible," asked Fred Mayfield, "that he rushed down there just after your phone call?"

"No, that's the hell of it. It just wasn't possible. Don't suppose you know where the Atlas Plating Mills are—over toward Dumbarton, at the extreme other end of the city from Karr. A racing car might have made it in forty-five minutes. But the robbery, remember, occurred less than half an hour after I spoke to Karr on the phone."

"Well then, obviously," I concluded, "it must have been some mistake in identity."

"Mistake in identity—my eye!" Finch argued, impatiently. "Couldn't have made any mistake in identity, not with that gink, if you'd ever had a squint at him. Besides, what happened later showed it wasn't a mistake in identity."

"Well, what did happen later?"

"Plenty, believe me! The big climax didn't come, though, till I stuck my own finger into the pudding. Ordinarily, of course, I didn't go out with the boys on any of the cases. But I swore I'd lie in wait with them for the professor, by glory if I wouldn't

By this time, you see, I was getting desperate. The robberies of that blasted gang were coming so thick and fast there was getting to be a public furore, and my job hadn't the chance of a snowflake in hell if they kept up the game. So I thought I'd better crack the case wide-open myself."

"Did you?" I asked.

"I'm telling you, I did! But not at first. Things kept going downhill fast. It only made things worse one night when the boys nabbed two of the Rocco gang just as they were getting away with the swag over at the Northern Security Company. We put them through the third degree, like we never put anybody before. But they swore up and down they'd never seen old Karr or anybody like him. I knew very well they'd both have lied a mile a minute to save their own hides, but I couldn't see why they'd lie to save the professor, especially as we promised to let them off easy for squealing. What was more, they didn't look like guys that were lying. I don't think they could have play-acted the surprise they showed when we spoke of the professor."

"Well, what about your cracking the case open?"

"I'M coming to that." With a wry smile, Finch rubbed one hand across his ruddy face. "Lord! I sure didn't know what I was bucking one night when the boys brought me a tip-off of a safe cracking coming off down at Morehouse Appliance Company. I figured that the professor wasn't likely to keep away from anything like that, and I made my mind up I'd catch him, if it was within human power. Well, I guess I had self-confidence enough, even if I was due for a jolt. Anyhow, that night is one I won't ever forget. No, not if I live to be a hundred," the Chief finished, with something between a sigh and a groan, as he dabbed at an unseen perspiration on his shiny bald pate.

"So you met your friend Professor Karr again?"

"Wait, wait, not so fast there," he held me back. "We had everything beautifully staged to take on whoever came. There were six of us ranged all about that office, which was a large rambling one—we were all well hidden behind doors, desks and cabinets. I picked a prize place behind a row of large files, with just enough space between two of them to let me peek out without being seen. All of us boys was in place before midnight— and take my word it was a long, lonely wait there in the dark, none of us even daring to smoke or speak for fear of giving ourselves away."

"But did anybody come?" popped up Joe Tracy.

"Sure did. It was just 3:15 on the radium dial of my watch when we heard a faint creaking—and believe me, we tried not to breathe aloud. Maybe it was only the damned rats. But another creaking followed, and another, and we knew the rear window was being jimmied. I tell you I did admire the way those boys worked—quick and expert-like, didn't waste any time or make any unnecessary noise. It didn't seem more than a minute before we heard them coming. Luckily, the last half hour the moon, which was pretty near full, had moved far enough to shine right in through the big window opposite me; and there was enough light to see ordinary things, though the odd color of the walls, which were painted a sort of sickly blue, gave the moonlight a spooky look. Maybe it sounds queer to say it, but I felt just like somebody waiting patiently in a tomb."

"Yes, but what about those robbers? Was it really the Rocco gang?"

"Well, part of the gang. Three husky louts, looking just about as sure of themselves as the plumbers coming to fix a faucet, made a bee-line for the safe. Or, rather, two of them did; and the third kept a lookout. We didn't move a muscle till they were in place. It was our luck they didn't seem to have any hunch of anything wrong. Maybe success had made them careless. But all at once, when two of them were hunched over that safe, I gave the signal.

"Everything went off just the way we'd planned. Quicker'n you could draw a breath, those three bandits found themselves surrounded by the six of us, with our guns drawn. We didn't need to tell them to throw their hands up. They could see that the game was up, and anybody who made a move was a dead man."

"But Professor Karr? So Karr wasn't there?"

"JUST give me a chance, and you'll find out!" Finch reassured me, as he took time to light another cigar. "As I was saying, we'd covered all those three thugs. Everything happened so fast we didn't even have time to switch a light on. So here we had them cornered in that queer bluish moonlight, and two of the boys was about to slip on the handcuffs. But just at that moment I saw another figure. Swear to God I don't know where he came from; all the boys said afterwards they hadn't seen him come in. But there he was sure enough, motioning to the robbers as if trying to warn them; he was just across a wide desk from me, so near I couldn't help making out his features: his large bald head, his big eyes leering under their tortoise-shell glasses, his thin neck with the Adam's apple standing out from it.

"Well, I didn't waste any time letting my surprise bind and gag me. I leveled my pistol straight at the fellow. 'Hands up!'

"He didn't even seem to hear. In the most matter-of-fact way he started drifting —yes, drifting was how it looked to me— straight toward the hall door, about fifteen feet away.

" 'Halt!' I yelled. 'Or I'll shoot!'

"You'd have thought he was plumb deaf. He didn't hurry like a man who was trying to get away; he just kept on toward the door, like somebody walking in his sleep. In another second, his hand was lifted to the knob; a second more, and he'd have been out of reach. . . .

"I'll take my oath, boys, I don't know just how it happened. I'm mortally sure, though, I hadn't meant to fire—not, at least, the way I did. But I guess my fingers were shaky and my excitement got the best of me—you can picture it all for yourselves, with the blue moonlight filling that office, three men covering the three crooks with guns, and two others just about to clap the handcuffs on, when this lanky devil pops up God knows where from, and starts making his getaway as if he didn't give a damn for anybody. No wonder my gun went off.

"There was a bang that seemed louder than any pistol shot I ever heard before; a puff of smoke aimed right at the man's heart; and a terrible shuddering cry that I still remember in my nightmares, though to this day I can't be sure if it came from the struck man or heaven knows who else. Anyhow—and this was what pretty near bowled me over—when the smoke cleared away, old Karr wasn't anywhere in sight. What was more, we didn't find his slumped dead body. There wasn't even a trace of blood. The door was closed, showing he couldn't have gotten out; the bullet, stuck deep in the wood, was proof that the door couldn't have been open when the shot was fired."

The Chief paused; heaved a long sigh; and called for another drink.

"Maybe you only imagined you saw him," Mayfield dared to suggest.

"Imagined? Like hell!" denied Finch, giving his thigh a resounding slap with one plump hand. "All the other boys swore they saw him, too. Besides, I had another proof before the night was over—yes, one that sends the cold waves running down my spine every time I think of it. We'd hardly got back to headquarters, taking those three gangsters in tow, when I was told there was a phone call—something urgent. It was Officer Ryan, who'd been guarding the Karr home; his voice shook so you'd have thought he was scared of an invasion from Mars.

" 'Chief—Chief, for Christ's sake, Chief, jump into your car and beat it up here like hell!'

" 'What in the devil's name is it all about?' I bawled back.

"Like a man who's been taken with delirium tremens, he'd already put the receiver down, without seeming to hear me. So there wasn't anything for me to do but dash over to the Karr house, growling and cursing like a soused sailor, and swearing I'd demote Ryan if he'd called me on a wild-goose chase."

"But was it a wild-goose chase?"

"No, by God, it wasn't!"

Finch bit his thick lower lip, shook his head grimly, and slowly went on.

"When I got to the Karr house, the whole cursed place was blazing with lights. Ryan met me as I jumped out of the car, and his face looked white in the glare of the street-lamp. I followed him up to the professor's bedroom, and even before I got there I heard a woman sobbing. As we rushed in, the first thing my eyes fell on was that Hindu, Rasmani, who looked at me a little

like a cat that's about to spring. In a second, I'd taken in the rest of the scene: poor old Mrs. Karr, all hunched up in one corner, crying like she wouldn't ever stop; and a heavy-set mustached fellow that I recognized as Dr. Edmunds, as he used to be my married sister's family doctor. But what really glued my eyes to the spot was someone else that lay on the bed, as motionless as a rock. He wasn't wearing his tortoise-shell glasses now, and his glazed eyes were wide open, with a look of the most awful pain and terror—"

"God in heaven! Was he—was he—"

"WHEN I pushed my way in," Larry continued, ignoring my interruption, "the doctor turned from the thing on the bed. 'Glad you're here, Chief. I've done about all I can, but it looks like it's no use.'

" 'What was it, Doctor? Heart failure?'

" 'Well, you can call it that. We'll have to call it that in the report.' But it was plain as day he had some reservations in the back of his mind. 'Anyhow, I don't think you'll find any evidence of foul play.'

"Then, for the first time, the mother looked up. I was surprised at what blazing strength and fury she could show. 'Oh, but there must have been foul play! Emerson's heart was all right, I know it was! Why, you remember very well, Doctor, you examined it only last summer and said he ought to live to be a hundred!'

" 'Yes, but sometimes hidden complications, Mrs. Karr—'

" 'Oh, but the way he called out in the night! I'll never forget that scream—like a man being murdered! And then—then, when I got to his room, I found him—I found him—like you see him now—on the bed—'.

" 'It was pitiful the way that poor woman struggled with her feelings, then broke down again and sobbed. Just the same, there were some questions I had to put to her. And so, as soon as she'd quieted down a bit, I asked her, as gently as I knew how, 'About what time, Ma'am, have you any idea, did this thing occur?"

" 'Yes, I have a very good idea,' she answered, as soon as she could control herself. 'I slept wretchedly, and had just gone for some sleeping tablets in the bathroom cabinet. I happened to notice the time: exactly three-eighteen.'

" 'Three-eighteen?' I threw back at her, knocked right off my base. 'But it couldn't be! Why, that was just when I saw him down at Morehouse's. That was just when I fired at him!'

"I was amazed at the way those remarks were taken up. No, not by Karr's mother—by Rasmani, who'd been standing darkly in a corner. 'Oh, so you fired at him?' he burst out, in a fierce, accusing way I'd never have stood from any man if I hadn't been about shot to pieces. 'So you fired at him?'

"Well, what if I did? He was in the place, along with those safe-cracking thugs—'

"Rasmani muttered something I couldn't understand, probably an oath in his native jargon. But his next words were almost yelled at me. 'I see now! I see! From the moment I got that hysterical phone call from Mrs. Karr, I suspected something of the kind. So you fired at poor Emerson! Do you know what you've really done?'

"I can't begin to tell you how powerfully these words were hurled at me. There was a weird force about them, something that backed me into a corner, while Rasmani stood before me, pointing one finger at me like a condemning judge.

" 'Maybe you don't know,' he went on, 'that Karr was studying Yogi, under my care?'

" 'Yes, he mentioned that to me.'

" 'Then mark this: he was still in the first stages. He'd only advanced far enough to release his astral part—his spirit, as you westerners would call it—while he lay asleep. This might travel wherever his desires would take it, and might actually be seen, since it was a real entity—'

" 'But in that case,' I forced out, getting more and more confused, 'why in perdition was he getting mixed up with all kinds of bandits—'

"WITH a savage swift motion, Rasmani reached under the bed, and drew out a pile of brightly covered magazines: 'Banner Crime Stories,' and the like. 'Because he'd been secretly feeding on stuff like this, as a relief from routine and monotony—gratifying his suppressed impulses for ad-

venture, which had been starved all his life. Naturally, in these early Yogi stages, when the soul was let loose in sleep, it took the road of least resistance—the road of its day-dreams—in this case, connected with crime and detectives. The lower astral, we Orientals would call it. Just the same, he'd have risen in time—if it hadn't been for your shot.'

"'My shot?'

"'Yes, your shot. Don't you see now what you did? When you fired at him in your blundering ignorance, you sent a terrific shock to his astral part. This shock in turn was transmitted to the physical body, which lay at home in deep sleep. It is well known that any man, even the most healthy, can be killed by a severe enough nervous jolt. Well, this jolt was more than our friend could stand. He awoke to one moment of intense horror, which caused the scream Mrs. Karr heard—and that was all. Maybe you don't know it, Chief Finch, but you are a murderer. *You are a murderer!*'

"While the eyes of Rasmani and old Mrs. Karr followed me accusingly, I left the room. I told myself that that Hindu fakir was crazier'n a bat, but just the same in my heart I did feel like a murderer. And after some time had gone by and that goggle-eyed beanpole hadn't ever shown up again near a night crime but the Rocco gang had been broken up like a rotten squash, I knew Rasmani had been right. Karr had done more than hang around when the Rocco boys did a job. Remembering how he'd been motioning to them just before I fired the shot, I knew he'd been their guide, their secret captain. Maybe some of them didn't see him or know anything about him, but I'm mortally sure some of them did follow him, not knowing he wasn't flesh and blood. He'd showed them where to find the loot; showed them how to get around our nets. And that's why, when I think things over, I'm glad I fired that shot. Because even if I did get old Karr, I ended the Rocco gang too. And put a stop to the worst crime wave this city ever had."

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In the X-Ray

BY FRITZ LEIBER, Jr.

"DO THE dead come back?" Dr. Ballard repeated the question puzzledly. "What's that got to do with your ankle?"

"I didn't say that," Nancy Sawyer answered sharply. "I said, 'I tried an ice pack.' You must have misheard me."

"But . . ." Dr. Ballard began. Then, "Of course I must have," he said quickly. "Go on, Miss Sawyer."

The girl hesitated. Her glance strayed to the large, gleaming window and the graying sky beyond. She was a young woman with prominent eyes, a narrow chin, strong white teeth, reddish hair, and a beautiful, doe-like figure which included legs long and slim—except for the ankle of the one outstretched stockingless on the chair before her. That was encircled by a hard, white, somewhat irregular swelling.

Dr. Ballard was a man of middle age and size, with strong, soft-skinned hands. He looked intelligent and as successful as his sleekly furnished office.

"Well, there isn't much more to it," the girl said finally. "I tried the ice pack but the swelling wouldn't go down. So Marge made me call you."

"I see. Tell me, Miss Sawyer, hadn't your ankle bothered you before last night?"

"No. I just woke up from a nightmare frightened because something had grabbed my foot, and I reached down and touched my ankle—and there it was."

Heading by Vincent Napoli

The radiologist sees all manner of strange things . . . but none as strange as this!

"Your ankle didn't feel or look any different the day before?"

"No."

"Yet when you woke up the swelling was there?"

"Just as it is now."

"Do you think you might have twisted your foot while you were asleep?"

"No."

"And you don't feel any pain in it now?"

"No, except a feeling of something hard clasped snugly around it and every once in a while squeezing a bit tighter."

"Ever do any sleepwalking?"

"No."

"Any allergies?"

"No."

"Can you think of anything else—anything at all—that might have a bearing on this trouble?"

Again Nancy looked out the window. "I have a twin sister," she said after a moment, in a different voice. "Or rather, I had. She died more than a year ago." She looked back quickly at Dr. Ballard. "But I don't know why I should mention that," she said hurriedly. "It couldn't possibly have any bearing on this. She died of apoplexy."

There was a pause.

"I suppose the X-ray will show what's the matter?" she continued.

The doctor nodded. "We'll have it soon. Miss Snyder's getting it now."

Nancy started to get up, asked, "Is it all right for me to move around?" Dr. Ballard nodded. She went over to the window, limping just a little, and looked down.

"You have a nice view, you can see half the city," she said. "We have the river at our apartment. I think we're higher, though."

"This is the twentieth floor," Dr. Ballard said.

"We're twenty-three," she told him. "I like high buildings. It's a little like being in an airplane. With the river right under our windows I can imagine I'm flying over water."

There was a soft knock at the door. Nancy looked around inquiringly. "The X-ray?" He shook his head. He went to the door and opened it.

"It's your friend Miss Hudson."

"Hi, Marge," Nancy called. "Come on in."

THE stocky, sandy-haired girl hung in the doorway. "I'll stay out here," she said. "I thought we could go home together though."

"Darling, how nice of you. But I'll be a bit longer, I'm afraid."

"That's all right. How are you feeling, Nancy?"

"Wonderful, dear. Especially now that your doctor has taken a picture that'll show him what's inside this bump of mine."

"Well, I'll be out here," the other girl said and turned back into the waiting room. She passed a woman in white who came in, shut the door, and handed the doctor a large, brown envelope.

He turned to Nancy. "I'll look at this and be back right away."

"Dr. Myers is on the phone," the nurse told him as they started out. "Wants to know about tonight. Can he come here and drive over with you?"

"How soon can he get here?"

"About half an hour, he says."

"Tell him that will be fine, Miss Snyder."

The door closed behind them. Nancy sat still for perhaps two minutes. Then she jerked, as if at a twinge of pain. She looked at her ankle. Bending over, she clasped her hand around her good ankle and squeezed experimentally. She shuddered.

The door banged open. Dr. Ballard hurried in and immediately began to re-examine the swelling, swiftly exploring each detail of its outlines with gentle fingers, at the same time firing questions.

"Are you absolutely sure, Miss Sawyer, that you hadn't noticed anything of this swelling before last night? Perhaps just some slight change in shape or feeling, or a tendency to favor that ankle, or just a disinclination to look at it? Cast your mind back."

Nancy hesitated uneasily, but when she spoke it was with certainty. "No, I'm absolutely sure."

He shook his head. "Very well. And now, Miss Sawyer, that twin of yours. Was she identical?"

Nancy looked at him. "Why are you in-

terested in that? Doctor, what does the X-ray show?"

"I have a very good reason, which I'll explain to you later. I'll go into details about the X-ray then, too. You can set your mind at rest on one point, though, if it's been worrying you. This swelling is in no sense malignant."

"Thank goodness, Doctor."

"But now about the twin."

"You really want to know?"

"I do."

Nancy's manner and voice showed some signs of agitation. "Why, yes," she said, "we were identical. People were always mistaking us for each other. We looked exactly alike, but underneath ." Her voice trailed off. There was a change in the atmosphere of the office, a change hard to define. Abruptly she continued, "Dr. Ballard, I'd like to tell you about her, tell you things I've hardly told anyone else. You know, it was she I was dreaming about last night. In fact, I thought it was she who had grabbed me in my nightmare. What's the matter, Dr. Ballard?"

IT DID seem that Dr. Ballard had changed color, though it was hard to tell in the failing light. What he said, a little jerkily, was, "Nothing, Miss Sawyer. Please go ahead." He leaned forward a little, resting his elbows on the desk, and watched her.

"You know, Dr. Ballard," she began slowly, "most people think that twins are very affectionate. They think stories of twins hating each other are invented by writers looking for morbid plots.

"But in my case the morbid plot happened to be the simple truth. Beth tyrannized over me, hated me, and wasn't above expressing her hate in a physical way." She took a deep breath.

"It started when we were little girls. As far back as I can remember, I was always the slave and she was the mistress. And if I didn't carry out her orders faithfully, and sometimes if I did, there was always a slap or a pinch. Not a little-girl pinch. Beth had peculiarly strong fingers. I was very afraid of them.

"There's something terrible, Dr. Ballard, about the way one human being can intimidate another, crush their will power, reduce to mush their ability to fight back. You'd think the victim could escape so easily—look, there are people all around, teachers and friends to confide in, your father and mother—but it's as if you were bound by invisible chains, your mouth shut by an invisible gag. And it grows and grows, like the horrors of a concentration camp. A whole inner world of pain and fright. And yet on the surface—why, there seems to be nothing at all.

"For of course no one else had the faintest idea of what was going on between us. Everyone thought we loved each other very much. Beth especially was always being praised for her 'sunny gayety.' I was supposed to be a little 'subdued.' Oh, how she used to fuss and coo over me when there were people around. Though even then there would be pinches on the sly—hard ones I never winced at. And more than that, for. . . ."

Nancy broke off. "But I really don't think I should be wasting your time with all these childhood gripes, Dr. Ballard. Especially since I know you have an engagement for this evening."

"That's just an informal dinner with a few old cronies. I have lots of time. Go right ahead. I'm interested."

NANCY paused, frowning a little. "The funny thing is," she continued, "I never understood why Beth hated me. It was as if she were intensely jealous. Yet there was no reason for that. She was the successful one, the one who won the prizes and played the leads in the school shows and got the nicest presents and all the boys. But somehow each success made her worse. I've sometimes thought, Dr. Ballard, that only cruel people can be successful; that success is really a reward for cruelty . . to someone."

Dr. Ballard knit his brows, might have nodded.

"The only thing I ever read that helped explain it to me," she went on, "was something in psychoanalysis. The idea that each of us has an equal dose of love and hate, and that it's our business to balance them off, to act in such a way that both have ex-

pression and yet so that the hate is always under the control of the love.

"But perhaps when the two people are very close together, as it is with twins, the balancing works out differently. Perhaps all the softness and love begins to gather in the one person and all the hardness and hate in the other. And then the hate takes the lead, because it's an emotion of violence and power and action—a concentrated emotion, not misty like love. And it keeps on and on, getting worse all the time, until it's so strong you feel it will never stop, not even with death.

"For it did keep on, Dr. Ballard, and it did get worse." Nancy looked at him closely. "Oh, I know that what I've been telling you isn't supposed to be so unusual among children. 'Little barbarians,' people say, quite confident that they'll outgrow it. Quite convinced that wrist-twisting and pinching are things that will automatically stop when children begin to grow up."

Nancy smiled thinly at him. "Well, they don't stop, Dr. Ballard. You know, it's very hard for most people to associate actual cruelty with an adolescent girl, maybe because of the way girls have been glorified in advertising. Yet I could write you a pretty chapter on just that topic. Of course a lot of it that happened in my case was what you'd call mental cruelty. I was shy and Beth had a hundred ways of embarrassing me. And if a boy became interested in me, she'd always take him way."

"I'd hardly have thought she'd have been able to," remarked Dr. Ballard.

"You think I'm good-looking? But I'm only good-looking in an odd way, and in any case it never seemed to count then. It's true, though, that twice there were boys who wouldn't respond to her invitations. Then both times she played a trick that only she could, because we were identical twins. She would pretend to be me—she could always imitate my manner and voice, even my reactions, precisely, though I couldn't possibly have imitated her—and then she would do something that would make the boy drop me cold."

"Do something?"

Nancy looked down. "Oh, insult the boy cruelly, pretending to be me. Or else make some foul, boastful confession, pretending it was mine. If you knew how those boys loathed me afterwards.

"But as I said, it wasn't only mental cruelty or indecent tricks. I remember nights when I'd done something to displease her and I'd gone to bed before her and she'd come in and I'd pretend to be asleep and after a while she'd say—oh, I know, Dr. Ballard, it sounds like something a silly little girl would say, but it didn't sound like that then, with my head under the sheet, pressed into the pillow, and her footsteps moving slowly around the bed—she'd say, 'I'm thinking of how to punish you.' And then there'd be a long wait, while I still pretended to be asleep, and then the touch . . . oh, Dr. Ballard, her hands! I was so afraid of her hands! But . . what is it, Dr. Ballard?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"There's nothing much more to say. Except that Beth's cruelty and my fear went on until a year ago, when she died suddenly—I suppose you'd say tragically—of a blood clot on the brain. I've often wondered since then whether her hatred of me, so long and so cleverly concealed, mightn't have had something to do with it. Apoplexy's what haters die of, isn't it, doctor?

"I REMEMBER leaning over her bed the day she died, lying there paralyzed, with her beautiful face white and stiff as a fish's, one eye bigger than the other. I felt pity for her (You realize, doctor, don't you, that I always loved her?) but just then her hand flopped a little way across the blanket and touched mine, although they said she was completely paralyzed, and her big eye twitched around a little until it was looking almost at me and her lips moved and I thought I heard her say, 'I'll come back and punish you for this,' and then I felt her fingers moving, just a little, on my skin, as if they were trying to close on my wrist, and I jerked back with a cry.

"Mother was very angry with me for that. She thought I was just a selfish, thoughtless girl, afraid of death and unable to repress my fear even for my dying sister's sake. Of course I could never tell her the real reason. I've never really told that

to anyone, except you. And now that I've told you I hardly know why I've done it."

She smiled nervously, quite unhumorously.

"Wasn't there something about a dream you had last night?" Dr. Ballard asked softly.

"Oh yes!" The listlessness snapped out of her. "I dreamed I was walking in an old graveyard with gnarly gray trees, and overhead the sky was gray and low and threatening, and everything was weird and dreadful. But somehow I was very happy. But then I felt a faint movement under my feet and I looked down at the grave I was passing and I saw the earth falling away into it. Just a little cone-shaped pit at first, with the dark sandy earth sliding down its sides, and a small black hole at the bottom. I knew I must run away quickly, but I couldn't move an inch. Then the pit grew larger and the earth tumbled down its sides in chunks and the black hole grew. And still I was rooted there. I looked at the gravestone beyond and it said 'Elizabeth Sawyer, 1926-48.' Then out of the hole came a hand and arm, only there were just shreds of dark flesh clinging to the bone, and it began to feel around with an awful, snatching swiftness. Then suddenly the earth heaved and opened, and a figure came swiftly hitching itself up out of the hole. And although the flesh was green and shrunken and eaten and the eyes just holes, I recognized Beth—there was still the beautiful reddish hair. And then the ragged hand touched my ankle and instantly closed on it and the other hand came groping upward, higher, higher, and I screamed . . . and then I woke up."

NANCY was leaning forward, her eyes fixed on the doctor. Suddenly her hair seemed to bush out, just a trifle. Perhaps it had "stood on end." At any rate, she said, "Dr. Ballard, I'm frightened."

"I'm sorry if I've made you distress yourself," he said. The words were more reassuring than the tone of voice. He suddenly took her hand in his and for a few moments they sat there silently. Then she smiled and moved a little and said, "It's gone now. I've been very silly. I don't know why I told you all I did about Beth. It couldn't help you with my ankle."

"No, of course not," he said after a moment.

"Why did you ask if she was identical?"

He leaned back. His voice became brisker again. "I'll tell you about that right now—and about what the X-ray shows. I think there's a connection. As you probably know, Miss Sawyer, identical twins look so nearly alike because they come from the same germ cell. Before it starts to develop, it splits in two. Instead of one individual, two develop. That was what happened in the case of you and your sister." He paused. "But," he continued, "sometimes, especially if there's a strong tendency to twin births in the family, the splitting doesn't stop there. One of the two cells splits again. The result—triplets. I believe that also happened in your case."

Nancy looked at him puzzledly. "But then what happened to the third child?"

"The third sister," he amplified. "There can't be identical boy-and-girl twins or triplets, you know, since sex is determined in the original germ cell. There, Miss Sawyer, we come to my second point. Not all twins develop and are actually born. Some start to develop and then stop."

"What happens to them?"

"Sometimes what there is of them is engulfed in the child that does develop completely—little fragments of a body, bits of this and that, all buried in the flesh of the child that is actually born. I think that happened in your case."

Nancy looked at him oddly. "You mean I have in me bits of another twin sister, a triplet sister, who didn't develop?"

"Exactly."

"And that all this is connected with my ankle?"

"Yes."

"But then how—?"

"Sometimes nothing happens to the engulfed fragments. But sometimes, perhaps many years later, they begin to grow—in a natural way rather than malignantly. There are well-authenticated cases of this happening—as recently as 1890 a Mexican boy in this way 'gave birth' to his own twin brother, completely developed though of

course dead. There's nothing nearly as extensive as that in your case, but I'm sure there is a pocket of engulfed materials around your ankle and that it recently started to grow, so gradually that you didn't notice it until the growth became so extensive as to be irritating."

Nancy eyed him closely. "What sort of materials? I mean the engulfed fragments."

HE HESITATED. "I'm not quite sure," he said. "The X-ray was . oh, such things are apt to be odd, though harmless stuff—teeth, hair, nails, you never can tell. We'll know better later."

"Could I see the X-ray?"

He hesitated again. "I'm afraid it wouldn't mean anything to you. Just a lot of shadows."

"Could there be other pockets of fragments?"

"It's not likely. And if there are, it's improbable they'll ever bother you."

There was a pause.

Nancy said, "I don't like it."

"I don't like it," she repeated. "It's as if Beth had come back. Inside me."

"The fragments have no connection with your dead sister," Dr. Ballard assured her. "They're not part of Beth, but of a third sister, if you can call such fragments a person."

"But those fragments only began to grow after Beth died. As if Beth's soul. . . . And was it my original cell that split a second time?—or was it Beth's?—so that it was the fragments of half her cell that I absorbed, so that. . ." She stopped. "I'm afraid I'm being silly again."

He looked at her for a while, then, with the air of someone snapping to attention, quickly nodded.

"But doctor," she said, also like someone snatching at practicality, "what's to happen now?"

"Well," he replied, "in order to get rid of this disfigurement to your ankle, a relatively minor operation will be necessary. You see, this sort of foreign body can't be reduced in size by heat or X-ray or injections. Surgery is needed, though probably only under local anaesthetic. Could you arrange to enter a hospital tomorrow? Then I could operate the next morning. You'd have to stay about four days."

She thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think I could manage that." She looked distastefully at her ankle. "In fact, I'd like to do it as soon as possible."

"Good. We'll ask Miss Snyder to arrange things."

When the nurse entered, she said, "Dr. Myers is outside."

"Tell him I'll be right along," Dr. Ballard said. "And then I'd like you to call Central Hospital. Miss Sawyer will take the reservation we got for Mrs. Phipps and were about to cancel." And they discussed details while Nancy pulled on stocking and shoe.

Nancy said goodbye and started for the waiting room, favoring her bad leg. Dr. Ballard watched her. The nurse opened the door. Beyond, Nancy's friend got up with a smile. There was now, besides her, a dark, oldish man in the waiting room.

As the nurse was about to close the door, Dr. Ballard said, "Miss Sawyer."

She turned. "Yes?"

"If your ankle should start to trouble you tonight—or anything else—please call me."

"Thank you, doctor, I will."

Dr. Ballard nodded. Then he called to his friend, "Be right with you." The dark, oldish man flapped an arm at him.

The door closed. Dr. Ballard went to his desk, took an X-ray photograph out of its brown envelope, switched on the light, studied the photograph incredulously.

He put it back in its envelope and on the desk. He got his hat and overcoat from the closet. He turned out the light. Then suddenly he went back and got the envelope, stuffed it in his pocket, and went out.

THE dinner with Dr. Myers and three other old professional friends proved if anything more enjoyable than Dr. Ballard had anticipated. It led to relaxation, gossip, a leisurely evening stroll, a drink together, a few final yarns. At one point Dr. Ballard felt a fleeting impulse to get the X-ray out of his overcoat pocket and show it to them and tell his little yarn

about it, but something made him hesitate, and he forgot the idea. He felt very easy in his mind as he drove home about midnight. He even hummed a little. This mood was not disturbed until he saw the face of Miss Willis, his resident secretary.

"What is it?" he asked crisply.

"Miss Nancy Sawyer. She. . ." For once the imperturbable, graying blonde seemed to have difficulty speaking.

"Yes?"

"She called up first about an hour and a half ago."

"Her ankle had begun to pain her?"

"She didn't say anything about her ankle. She said she was getting a sore throat."

"What!"

"It seemed unimportant to me, too, though of course I told her I'd inform you when you got in. But she seemed rather frightened, kept complaining of this tightness she felt in her throat. . ."

"Yes? Yes?"

"So I agreed to get in touch with you immediately. She hung up. I called the restaurant, but you'd just left. Then I called Dr. Myers' home, but didn't get any answer. I told the operator to keep trying.

"About a half hour ago Miss Sawyer's friend, a Marge Hudson, called. She said Miss Sawyer had gone to bed and was apparently asleep, but she didn't like the way she was tossing around, as if she were having a particularly bad dream, and especially she didn't like the noises she was making in her throat, as if she were having difficulty breathing. She said she had looked closely at Miss Sawyer's throat as she lay sleeping, and it seemed swollen. I told her I was making every effort to get in touch with you and we left it at that."

"That wasn't all?"

"No." Miss Willis' agitation returned. "Just two minutes before you arrived, the phone rang again. At first the line seemed to be dead. I was about to hang up. Then I began to hear a clicking, gargling sound. Low at first, but then it grew louder. Then suddenly it broke free and whooped out in what I think was Miss Sawyer's voice. There were only two words, I think, but I couldn't catch them because they were so loud they stopped the phone. After that, nothing, although I listened and listened and kept saying 'hello' over and over. But Dr. Ballard, that gargling sound! It was as if I were listening to someone being strangled, very slowly, very, very. . . ."

But Dr. Ballard had grabbed up his surgical bag and was racing for his car. He drove rather well for a doctor and, tonight, very fast. He was about three blocks from the river when he heard a siren, ahead of him.

NANCY SAWYER'S apartment hotel was at the end of a short street terminated by a high concrete curb and metal fence and, directly below, the river. Now there was a fire engine drawn up to the fence and playing a searchlight down over the edge through the faintly misty air. Dr. Ballard could see a couple of figures in shiny black coats beside the searchlight. As he jumped out of his car he could hear shouts and what sounded like the motor of a launch. He hesitated for a moment, then ran into the hotel.

The lobby was empty. There was no one behind the counter. He ran to the open elevator. It was an automatic. He punched the twenty-three button.

On that floor there was one open door in the short corridor. Marge Hudson met him inside it.

"She jumped?"

The girl nodded. "They're hunting for her body. I've been watching. Come on."

She led him to a dark bedroom. There was a studio couch, its covers disordered, and beside it a phone. River air was pouring in through a large, hinged window, open wide. They went to it and looked down. The circling launch looked like a toy boat. Its searchlight and that from the fire engine roved across the dark water. Shouts and chugging came up faintly.

"How did it happen?" he asked the girl at the window.

"I was watching her as she lay in bed," Marge Hudson answered without looking around. "About twenty minutes after I called your home, she seemed to be getting worse. She had more trouble breathing. I tried to wake her, but couldn't. I went to the kitchen to make an ice pack. It took

longer than I'd thought. I heard a noise that at first I didn't connect with Nancy. Then I realized that she was strangling. I rushed back. Just then she screamed out horribly. I heard something fall—I think it was the phone—and footsteps and the window opening. When I came in she was standing on the sill in her nightdress, clawing at her throat. Before I could get to her, she jumped."

"Earlier in the evening she'd complained of a sore throat?"

"Yes. She said, jokingly, that the trouble with her ankle must be spreading to her throat. After she called your home and couldn't get you, she took some aspirin and went to bed."

Dr. Ballard switched on the lamp by the bed. He pulled the brown envelope from his coat pocket, took out the X-ray and held it up against the light.

"You say she screamed at the end," he said in a not very steady voice. "Were there any definite words?"

The girl at the window hesitated. "I'm not sure," she said slowly. "They were suddenly choked off, exactly as if a hand had tightened around her throat. But I think there were two words. 'Hand' and 'Beth.'"

Dr. Ballard's gaze flickered toward the mocking face in the photograph on the chest of drawers, then back to the ghostly black and whites of the one in his hands. His arms were shaking.

"They haven't found her yet," Marge said, still looking down at the river and the circling launch.

Dr. Ballard was staring incredulously at the X-ray, as if by staring he could make what he saw go away. But that was impossible. It was a perfectly defined and unambiguous exposure.

There, in the X-ray's blacks and grays, he could see the bones of Nancy Sawyer's ankle and, tightly clenched around them, deep under skin and flesh, the slender bones of a human hand.

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The Previous Incarnation

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

CONSTANCE EMERSON was agitated.

That's a simple declarative sentence to those of you who never knew her; but to others like myself, it's a statement as startling as if I were to tell you, in all earnest, that the Wrigley Building had just gone for a short stroll down Michigan Boulevard.

My astonishment couldn't have been more complete when I opened my door at the ring of the bell on that stormy night, and found Constance on my doorstep, looking as if she'd just fallen off the end of a broom. Constance—who, I would have sworn, could have managed to look *soignée* even in the middle of a midnight fire at sea. Her disheveled appearance was partially explained when I saw that her car wasn't parked at the curb, and realized she must

Can a memory of former lives make this one intolerable?

Heading by Vincent Napoli

have walked the several intervening blocks between our homes. Constance—who barely managed to drift languidly from room to room in the sprawling mansion Lloyd had built for her!

Too bemused even to stutter a question, I drew her in and led her to a chair before the fireplace, where she could stretch her fragile, tall-heeled slippers to the blaze.

"I had to see you, Dave," she said, distrait. "You're Lloyd's best friend. You'll have to tell me what to do."

And she began to cry.

With difficulty, I kept my jaws firmly together, though my astonishment was mounting by the moment. With anyone else, I might have suspected marital discord. But a quarrel between Lloyd and Constance was unthinkable. Constance didn't quarrel.

A pale blonde of the madonna order, tall, cool, remote, she was lovely enough if you cared for the type, but I had never been able entirely to understand Lloyd's great love for her. She responded to his attentions and devotion with even less warmth than a child of great wealth might accord the gift of a penny lollipop. I would, myself, as readily become infatuated with a deep-freeze unit.

But now, out of the long friendship I'd borne Lloyd, I bent forward and said with as much sympathy as I could muster, "Tell me what the trouble is, Constance."

She dried her eyes, and smoothed her hair, and said with something of her old calm, "I believe the trouble must have started when he was struck by that hit-and-run car a week ago."

I said, "But the hospital released him the next morning, when the doctor said he'd suffered only a slight concussion. Do you mean he was more seriously injured than we thought?"

"I don't know what's the matter with him," Constance said. "And I don't care what Doctor Robertson's opinion was. Lloyd simply hasn't been the same since. He sits there looking blankly at me as if he'd never seen me before, and there's the strangest expression of concentration on his face all the time, as if he were trying his very best to remember something."

"Why not have Doctor Robertson look him over again?"

"I did suggest it, but Lloyd refuses to see him," Constance said. "And if I ask him any questions, he only grows irritable. As you know, I've always been a very reserved person, and I simply cannot continue to probe when my questions are so obviously unwelcome."

I attempted to soothe her. "It doesn't sound so very alarming to me, Constance. The concussion probably caused a mild form of amnesia."

"Mild?" Constance had a small smile for what she evidently considered an understatement. "Miss Greenbaum, his secretary, called me on the telephone from his office the other day to ask me if I were entirely satisfied with my husband's condition since the accident. She said he's displaying the most alarming apathy to his brokerage business, and things have reached a point now where she's beginning to fear his customers will soon notice."

At that, Constance must have seen that I was beginning to take her story more seriously. After all, Constance and his business had been Lloyd's life. If he were growing indifferent to both, there was surely something wrong.

She went on, "These last few evenings, Lloyd has stared at me blankly all through dinner. It's like living with a ghost." She shivered a very little. "And after dinner he has taken to locking himself in the library. And when occasionally I've grown alarmed at his silence in there, and knocked on the door, he suggests in the coldest voice imaginable that I please leave him undisturbed. He's locked in there now. It has played on my nerves to such an extent by now, that I simply couldn't stand another moment of it. That's why I've come to you."

I said, "Suppose I return with you? Perhaps he'll consent to see me. If it is amnesia, as it sounds to me, the face of his oldest friend might serve to recall his memory."

"If the face of his own wife—" Constance began. Then she shrugged. "Perhaps it would be best. Something must be done, and I can suggest nothing else."

ACCORDINGLY, I took my car from the garage, and together we drove over to the Emerson place. Though mine is but a modest bachelor establishment, just three short blocks away the homes of wealthier people turn their backs haughtily to the lake.

I drove between the granite gate posts, their wrought-iron gates standing permanently ajar, as I'd done so many times before, and pulled up under the dripping *porte-cochere.*

Constance and I entered the house, and at the door of the library she stood aside while I knocked. For a minute, I wondered if Lloyd would answer at all; but then the key turned in the lock and he opened the door.

"Oh, it's you, Dave. Hello. Come on in."

I think I'd been prepared for anything but this casual, ordinary greeting.

Constance murmured something about going to her room to change into dry things. There was a time when Lloyd would have clucked like a mother-hen to hear she'd been out in the rain, would have worried lest she had taken cold.

Now he merely nodded absently. I saw her bite her lip as she turned away, saw the significant glance she flashed at me.

When I entered the library, Lloyd shut and locked the door behind him. He's a big man with graying hair, and shrewd fans of wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes. He's well into middle age, as I am myself, and some years older than Constance.

After hearing Constance's story, I was prepared to find him looking somewhat altered, for I hadn't seen him since the week before, when I'd called at the hospital, after hearing of the accident, to find out how he was. But, save that he seemed to have lost a little of his usual florid color, I could see no evidence that he had changed in any physical way. And if I'd expected to find his shrewd blue eyes clouded with the haze of a blurred memory, I couldn't have been more mistaken.

He mixed highballs for us, and we seated ourselves in chairs that were none too comfortable. The room was beautiful, yes; but it never failed to depress me. Constance had done it, and it had the cold, bloodless perfection of everything that Constance touched.

Lloyd said casually, looking around as if he were seeing it for the first time, "What this room needs, right in the middle of the floor, is a big, brass spittoon."

I was so stunned that I nearly dropped my glass. I had never heard Lloyd utter anything that could be construed as even the most indirect criticism of Constance before. Truly he was altered.

Before I could say anything in answer to that, Lloyd looked at me shrewdly. "So Constance sent for you, eh?"

I put my glass on an end table, and leaned forward, forearms on knees.

"Lloyd," I said. "What's the matter? I've never seen Constance so disturbed. You know how self-contained she has always been. Her present state of mind, in a more volatile person, would approximate hysteria. You must be frightening her nearly out of her wits."

He seemed genuinely surprised. "Why should Constance be frightened?"

"She says you regard her this past week as if you don't know her." I studied his face before adding casually, "Lloyd, I'm your oldest friend. You know you can tell me anything that's troubling you, and Constance need never know about it, if, for some reason, you desire secrecy. Are you having trouble remembering things since your accident? After all, amnesia is not uncommon—"

"Amnesia? Oh, is that the explanation you'd arrived at between yourselves?" He smiled faintly, and then the smile faded. He sat there, staring somberly into the depths of his highball glass. "No, I wouldn't call it amnesia. Quite the reverse, in fact. My memory is too good, nowadays."

A cryptic statement, but I let it pass. For I saw now, even more clearly, what Constance had meant. Lloyd apparently had forgotten me for the moment. There was a strange expression on his face, and in his eyes something that I can only describe as a *listening* look. As if the record of memory were playing a tune just too faintly for him to hear it, and he was striving desperately to bring it nearer.

"Lloyd!" I waited till I was sure I had

his undivided attention. I searched my memory for obscure incidents from the remote past in which we'd both participated. "Do you remember—?"

He remembered everything I suggested perfectly, and amplified them in such a way as to suggest to me unmistakably there could be nothing wrong with his memory. The nearer past he recalled with as little trouble.

He smiled grimly when I'd exhausted my tests.

"Still harping on the amnesia theory, eh?" he said.

I was defeated. Only one thing else occurred to me, and unbelievable as it was I voiced it. "If your memory hasn't failed, then your behavior of the past week, Lloyd, can mean only one thing. You just don't love Constance any more?"

"No, you're wrong about that." He shook his head. "I love Constance quite as much as I ever did." He paused then, and looked me directly in the eyes, before continuing with his amazing statement. "But I've come to realize that the love I feel for Constance is a very pallid emotion, indeed, compared to that I once bore for—Heptenartas!"

NOW Lloyd and I have been bosom friends since we were ten years old. We went to school together. We spent vacations together. We've never lived farther than four blocks apart. Perhaps the only occasion in our whole lives that we'd been separated for longer than a week was at the time he and Constance went to Bermuda for their honeymoon. I thought I'd known him as well as I knew myself.

But now I gaped at him. "Who under the sun is Heptenartas?"

Instead of answering me immediately, he got up from his chair and went to the window, pulling back the pale chiffon curtains to stare out into the blackness of the rainy night.

When he let the curtains drop finally, and came back to sit opposite me again, he said, low, "Look, Dave. I don't want to tell you all this. You'll think I'm insane."

But my curiosity had been whetted razor-sharp by his mention of that odd name. I said. "You've told me too much to stop now. I can't promise to believe what you tell me but at least I won't accuse you of being mad."

And certainly, as he sat there, one could look far to find a man who appeared more rational.

He freshened our drinks first before he said, "It goes back to the accident of a week ago. I'd suffered no permanent ill effects physically. A night in the hospital, and I left the next day feeling as well as I ever had. But I knew even then that I had changed. I'm not suffering from amnesia, as you and Constance seem to fear. On the contrary, my memory is better than it ever was. The only explanation I can give you, and that seems fairly reasonable even to myself, is that the blow on my head must have — shall we say, unblocked? — older channels of memory still. For I can not only remember the details of this life as clearly as ever, I'm also beginning to have hazy recollections of a former life, a previous incarnation!"

Remembering my promise to him, and determined to keep it at all cost that I might present no obstacle to his hesitant confidence, I'd steeled myself deliberately to betray no emotion at anything he might say.

I flatter myself I succeeded very well. No hint of surprise crossed my face, I'm sure. I repeated merely, "A previous incarnation?" as if he'd just made a most commonplace statement.

I think he was pleased at the way I took it, for he talked more eagerly now. "Yes, though the details are hazy in the extreme, save for one or two instances. But, you know, during this past week, I've spent more and more time by myself, striving my utmost to recall and recapture each fragment of memory. And it's growing clearer! Really, it is! I feel certain that with time I will recall every least detail of my life in my previous incarnation!"

I had to be careful. I said, "Do you care to tell me what you do remember? What period were you living in?"

HE WAS anxious to talk now. I think he'd wanted to talk of his amazing discovery to somebody, this week past. He'd despaired only of finding a sympathetic listener.

He said, "I'm still not sure of the exact period, but it must be several thousands of years ago. And I'm in a country that can only be the Egypt of that time."

Some shade of disappointment must have crossed my face then, and he must have seen it.

For he cried, "No, no, don't misunderstand me! This is no arm-chair tourist's dream of pyramids and sphinxes and waving palms beside the Nile. You know I've never been to Egypt in *this* life. Yet, even if I had been, I could not possibly recall these subtle indications of the country. I see my house and my shop very clearly. I even know what work I do. I'm a stonemason, and I use my strange tools skilfully, though there are no such tools today. At least, none that I have ever seen in *this* life."

"And Heptenartas?" I asked.

At the mention of that odd name, I can't begin to describe the transfiguration of his face. It glowed with an inner light, and the years visibly dropped away from it. He seemed a young man again.

He said softly, "Heptenartas? She's not my wife, but I love her! And with what a love! How could I possibly continue to believe that this emotion I feel for Constance is love, even though I know that it truly is, in this life? But it pales to invisibility beside this other, greater love for Heptenartas!"

He looked at me with shining eyes. "Do you wonder I want to know more? Do you wonder that I'll never rest until I know *all?* Do you wonder that I look at Constance now as if she were not there? She *is* not there! She's scarcely visible to these eyes that look ecstatically now upon Heptenartas! Ah, Dave! If you could but see her! The slanted, secret, provocative dark eyes. The skin like sun-ripened apricots! The scarlet mouth! The tiny waist to be spanned in less than the space of these two hands joined!"

I daresay in this day and age such extravagant language sounds ridiculous. But I assure you that you would not have laughed had you been there to hear the vibrant timbre of his voice, to see the ecstatic light in his eyes as he sang his own *Song of Songs*, his unembarrassed, uninhibited tribute to the charms of the woman he loved!

I said nothing. What could I have said?

And at last, noting my lack of response, the elation left his face, and he seemed old again, and sad, and disappointed. As if he'd tried his best to reach me only to find that the way was blocked.

And he said, "I'm very tired, Dave. If you'll excuse me?"

No more passed between us.

I left the house without seeing Constance.

And I slept not at all that night.

I KNEW in the morning that Constance would be in to see me sometime during the course of the day. But, until I could marshall my thoughts, I determined to say nothing to her of what Lloyd had told me the night before.

I was not at all sure in my own mind that Lloyd was mad, or even on the verge of insanity, though I am willing to concede that his story had been preposterous. Yet, perhaps with that small superstitious segment of my mind that we all retain as our heritage from the Dark Ages, I found myself wanting, to believe in his sincerity, wanting to believe that his accident had caused him honestly to recover his memory of a former existence.

My mind, in other words, rejected his story; my emotions accepted it. Perhaps subconsciously I found his story convincing because he had seemed to care so little whether or not I did.

Constance did drop in that afternoon, but I gave an evasive answer to her anxious inquiries.

"I did notice a change in Lloyd," I admitted. "And he told me a story so fantastic that I shan't repeat it, for it would serve only to alarm you. But, Constance, I'm sure this is only a temporary aberration of his, and I shouldn't worry about it if I were you. It's my belief that he's suffering from shock, and let's just wait to see if Time will effect a cure, as I'm sure it will."

A woman's curiosity being what it is, this did not serve to check further questions, but when she saw that I adamantly refused to enlarge on what Lloyd had told me, she finally desisted. Cool disapproval

was written on her face as she tendered me an invitation to dine with them one night in the following week.

It was a most uncomfortable dinner.

To begin with, Lloyd's self-absorption had grown by now to such an extent that he seemed completely oblivious of his surroundings. He left the burden of conversation, in the main, to Constance and myself, and he looked acutely unhappy.

And Constance?

Women are unfathomable. When she had been sure of his devotion, she seemed completely indifferent to it. But now that she had lost it, she strove in every way to woo him. She might as well have tried to excite to life a statue cast in bronze.

After dinner, Lloyd told Constance, "I have something to say to Dave, my dear, that would only bore you. So, if you don't mind—?"

She nodded unhappily and went alone into the drawing room while Lloyd and I closeted ourselves in the library.

I think he must have been waiting all through dinner for a chance to tell me, for he said at once, baldly, "Heptenartas is dead!"

Still determined to humor him, I murmured conventionally that I was sorry. He didn't appear to hear me. He sat there slumped despondently, and never have I seen grief so poignant on any human face.

Thinking to distract him, I asked, "Your memories have been growing clearer, then, since the last time I saw you?"

"Yes, they have," he admitted. "But, Dave, my first feeling of exhilaration has left me. And do you know why? Because I'm beginning to remember not only the joys but the cares and sorrows of my former life. And these added to those of my present life—do you see? My heart has been heavy. And now—now I'm beginning to get glimmerings of *other* incarnations!"

I didn't like the look in his eyes.

I said, "Lloyd, do you know what I would do, if I were you? Why don't you take a trip with Constance? See new scenes. Try to distract your mind. Forget this business of probing your memory."

If he had rejected my idea with violence, I should have felt that there was some hope of winning him over. But he said, "No," with such abysmal indifference that I was afraid the project was hopeless.

Nevertheless, when I spoke to Constance alone before I left, I told her what I had in mind, and suggested that she wait a few days and then bring up the subject of travel herself, warning her, however, that I was sure he would oppose it.

You may judge for yourself, then, the extent of my surprise when Constance called me on the telephone on the next morning but one.

"I thought you said that Lloyd didn't want to go away?" she said.

"He didn't."

"We're leaving tomorrow morning on a leisurely motor trip to the Coast."

"How did you ever manage to bring him around?"

"But I didn't!" she said. "The idea was his. He's terribly excited about going."

There was an explanation for his change of heart that I didn't learn about until later. Now I merely accepted it as further evidence of the erratic state of his mind.

AN AGED uncle of mine chose that time to die in another state, and I was forced to go there in connection with the settlement of legal matters attendant upon his death. I should have returned shortly had not the recurrence of an old malady hospitalized me there for some time. It was three months before I again returned to our suburban community on the lake front north of Chicago.

In the mail that had accumulated during my absence, I found a letter from Constance, post-marked Reno, Nevada, and dated several weeks before. Her writing style was as frigid as herself, and she said, in part:

"Lloyd has at last condescended to tell me the reason for his eccentric behavior in recent weeks. It appears that he is dedicated to a highly improbable belief that he retains clear memories of a life in a previous incarnation, or incarnations.

"He has spoken constantly of some woman whom he calls Heptenartas, and to whom he was apparently devoted in his former life. She had died, however, and the

recollection of this was the cause of his despondency on that last evening we all dined together. He thought all hope of happiness was gone from him forever. But later, he said, he saw the error of his reasoning. He had been born again, hadn't he? Why, then, shouldn't Heptenartas have been born again also into a new life?

"He became convinced that this was indeed so; that Heptenartas lived again in this present life, contemporaneous with his own; though of course under another name, and with no recollection of a former existence, just as he had lived until that lucky accident, as he referred to it, restored his memory.

"He determined at once to seek her up and down the land, and that was the reason for his sudden, excited interest in travel.

"I prefer to forbear, dear David, from making any comment on this extravagant story. Suffice it to say that the man is obviously deranged, and for myself life with him has become intolerable. I have established residence here in Reno, and shall institute divorce proceedings so soon as I may.

"Lloyd, I believe, has returned to Chicago."

And she was truly mine, Constance.

Naturally I lost no time in repairing at once to the Emerson residence. Lloyd was there alone, living without servants, and when he opened the door I found him shockingly altered. He had lost a great deal of weight. His face was haggard. His eyes were haunted. I couldn't be sure that he knew me.

"I've heard from Constance;" I said.

"Constance?" he said, as if he had never even heard of her.

"Why not come back with me to my place, Lloyd," I said gently, "and we'll keep Bachelor Hall together for a while?"

He shook his head.

I tried another tack. "You've had no clue to the present whereabouts of Heptenartas?"

He didn't even brighten at the sound of her name. And, at that, I was really alarmed. He merely turned into the library, shutting and locking the door behind him. Nor would he answer my repeated knocking on its panels; until at last I grew discouraged, and went away.

MANY times since then I've thought: Perhaps if I had persisted? If I had not grown discouraged so easily? But, in my heart, I know I'm only tormenting myself needlessly with such thoughts. I'm sure it doesn't really matter that I didn't stay, that if I had succeeded in rousing Lloyd momentarily from his depression it would have served only to delay for a time the final and inevitable result.

For sometime during that night after I left him, Lloyd went out to his garage, and locked the doors, and turned on the motor of his car. He was found there on the following morning, a suicide from carbon monoxide poisoning. And I had lost a friend.

Constance maintains to this day that Lloyd's strange deterioration was really insanity in one of its subtler manifestations.

I have never really liked Constance.

And I hope the woman Lloyd loves in his next incarnation—

But there! The pen trembles in my hand as I see with what calm acceptance I've written of Lloyd's *next* incarnation!

Have I believed his story? Was it really true?

Or am I, too, going mad?

Let me read again the letter Lloyd left me that night on which he died. The letter in which he wrote:

"I can no longer continue to live under the burden of thousands of years of grief. My memory of former lives has become appallingly clear, and, as in this life, the cares far outweigh the joys. I am forgetting even Heptenartas under this devastating weight of misfortunes and mental afflictions! Existence, for me, has become insupportable. I *cannot* live!"

It seemed a weak explanation for taking his life, I had thought at first. But consider if Lloyd's story *were* true. Let your imagination dwell upon it.

Ah, it is only *then* that the terror really enters!

Floral Tribute

BY ROBERT BLOCH

There's one sure place where old kin and friends can get together—forever

THEY always had fresh flowers on the table at Grandma's house. That's because Grandma lived right in back of the cemetery.

"Nothing like flowers to brighten up a room," Grandma used to say. "Ed, be a good boy and take a run over. Fetch me back something pretty. Seems to me there was doings yesterday afternoon near the big Weaver Vault—you know where I mean. Pick out some nice ones and, mind you, no lilies."

Heading by John Giunta

So Ed would scamper off, climbing the fence in the back yard and jumping down over the old Putnam grave and its leaning headstone. He'd race down the paths, taking shortcuts through bushes and behind statues. Ed knew every inch of the cemetery long before he was seven—he learned it playing hide-and-seek there with the gang, after dark.

Ed liked the cemetery. It was better than the back yard, better than the rickety old house where Grandma and he lived; and by the time he was four, he played among the tombs every day. There were big trees and bushes everywhere; lots of nice green grass, and fascinating paths that wound off endlessly into a maze of mounds and white stones. Birds were forever singing or darting down over the flowers. It was pretty there, and quiet, and there was nobody to watch, or bother, or scold—as long as Ed remembered to stay out of the way of Old Sourpuss, the caretaker. But Old Sourpuss lived in another house; a big stone one, over on the other end, at the big cemetery entrance.

Grandma told Ed all about Old Sourpuss, and warned him against letting the caretaker catch him inside the grounds.

"He doesn't like to have little boys playing in there," she said. "Especially when there's a funeral going on. Way he acts, a body'd think he owned the place. Where's nobody's got a better right to use it as they see fit than we have, if the truth were known.

"So you go ahead and play there all you want, Ed, only don't let him see you. After all, a body's only young once, I always say."

Grandma was swell. Just plain swell. She even let him stay up late at night, and play hide-and-seek with Susie and Joe, behind the headstones.

Of course, she didn't really care, because at night was when Grandma had her company over.

Almost nobody came to see Grandma in the daytime any more. There was just the ice-man and the grocery boy and sometimes the mailman—usually he just came about once a month with Grandma's pension check. Most days there was nobody in the house except Grandma and Ed.

But at night, she had company. They never came before supper, but along about eight o'clock, when it got dark, they started drifting in. Sometimes there were only one or two, sometimes a whole bunch. Most always, Mr. Willis was there, and Mrs. Cassidy, and Sam Gates. There were others, too, but Ed remembered these three the best.

Mr. Willis was a funny man. He was always grumbling and complaining about the cold, and quarreling with Grandma about what he called "my property."

"You have no idea how cold it gets," he used to say, sitting over in the corner next to the fireplace and rubbing his hands. "Day after day it seems to get colder and colder. Not that I'm complaining too much, mind you. It's nothing as bad as the rheumatism I used to have. But you'd think that they'd at least have given me a decent lining. After all the money I left them, to pick out a cheap pine job like that, with some kind of shiny cotton stuff that didn't even last through the first winter—"

Oh, he was a grumbler, that Mr. Willis. He had a long, pale old man's face that seemed to be all wrinkles and scowl. Ed never really got a good look at him, because right after supper when they went into the parlor, Grandma would turn out all the lights and just keep the fire going in the fireplace. "We got to cut down on bills," she used to tell Ed. "This little widow's mite of mine is hardly enough to keep body and soul together for one, let alone an orphan, too."

Ed was an orphan; he knew that, but it never bothered him. Nothing seemed to bother him, the way things bothered people like old Mr. Willis.

"To think I'd come to this in the end," Mr. Willis would sigh. "Why, my family owned this place. Fifty years ago it was just a pasture—nothing but meadowland. You know that, Hannah."

Hannah was Grandma's name; Hannah Morse. And Grandpa's name had been Robert Morse. Grandpa had died a long time ago in a war and Grandma never even knew where he was buried. But first he had built this house for Grandma. That's what made Mr. Willis so mad, Ed guessed.

"When Robert built this house, I gave

him the land," Mr. Willis complained. "That was fair and square. But when the city came in and took over—made me take a price for the whole shooting-match—there was nothing fair and square about that. Bunch of crooked lawyers, cheating a man out of his rightful property, with all their gib-gab about forced sales and condemning. Way I see it, I'still got a moral right. A moral right. Not just to that itty-bitty little plot where they planted me, but to the whole shebang."

"What do you plan to do," Mrs. Cassidy would say, "Evict us?"

THEN she would laugh, real soft, because all of Grandma's friends sounded soft no matter how happy or mad they got. Ed liked to watch Mrs. Cassidy laugh, because she was a big woman and she laughed all over.

Mrs. Cassidy wore a lovely black dress, always the same one, and she was all powdered and rouged and painted up. She talked to Grandma a lot about something called "perpetual care."

"I'll always be grateful for one thing," Ed remembered her saying. "And that's my perpetual care. The flowers are so pretty—I picked out the design for the blanket myself. And they keep the trim so nice, even in winter. I wish you could see the scrollwork on the box, too; all that handcarving in mahogany. They certainly spared no expense, let me tell you, and I'm mighty grateful. Mighty grateful. Why, if I hadn't forbid it in the will, I'll bet they'd have put up a monument. As it is, I think the plain Vermont granite has a little more restraint —you know, dignity."

Ed didn't understand Mrs. Cassidy very well, and besides, it was more interesting to listen to Sam Gates. Sam was the only one who paid much attention to Ed.

"Hi, sonny," he would say. "Come over and sit by me. Want to hear about the battles, sonny?"

Sam Gates was a young-looking man, always smiling. He'd sit there in front of the fire, with Ed sprawled out at his feet, and then there would be wonderful stories to hear. Like the time Sam Gates met Abe Lincoln—not President Lincoln, but just plain Abe, the lawyer from down in Springfield-Illinois. Then there was the story about General Grant and the story about something called the Bloody Corner, where the boys in blue really gave 'em the cold steel.

"Wisht I could have lasted out to see the finish," Sam Gates would sigh. "Course, by '64 wasn't one of us on either side didn't know how it would end. After Gettysburg we had 'em on the run. And maybe it's just as well I didn't have to go through all that messing around with Reconstruction, or whatever they called it. Nosiree, sonny, I guess I was lucky in a way at that. Leastways, I never had to grow old, like Willis here. Never had to marry and settle down and raise a family and end up mumbling in the corner, trying to gum my porkchops. I'd have come to the same thing at the last, anyhow—isn't that so, friends?"

And Sam Gates would look around the room and wink. Sometimes Grandma got mad at him.

"Wish you wouldn't carry on that way," she said. "Watch your language, please. Little pitchers have big ears. Just because you're all sociable and come around on account of this house being more or less a part of the property—so to speak—that's no reason you got to go putting ideas in the head of a six year old. It ain't decent."

That was a sure sign Grandma was mad; when she said "ain't." And at such times Ed usually got up and went out to play with Susie and Joe.

Thinking back, years later, Ed couldn't remember the first time he played with Susie and Joe. The moments they spent together were quite fresh in his memory, but other details escaped him; where they lived, who their parents were, why they only came around at night, calling under the kitchen window.

"Oh Ed-*deeee!* C'mon out and play!"

Joe was a black-haired, quiet kid of about nine. Susie was Ed's age or even a little younger; she had curly, taffy-colored hair and always wore a ruffled dress which she was careful not to stain or dirty, no matter what games they played.

Ed had a crush on her.

They played hide-and-seek all over the cool, dark graveyard, night after night; call-

ing faintly and giggling quietly at one another. Even now, Ed recalled how quiet the children were. He tried vainly to remember other games they played, like tag, where they'd touch each other. He was sure, somehow, that he had touched them, but no single instance came in recollection. Mainly he remembered Susie's face, her smile, and the way she called in her little-girl voice.

"Oh Ed-*deeee!*"

ED NEVER told anyone what he remembered, afterwards. Because afterwards was when the trouble started. It began when the people from the school came and asked Grandma why he wasn't attending first grade.

They got to talking with her, and then they talked to Ed. There was a lot of confusion—he remembered Grandma crying, and a big man with a blue suit on came in and showed her a lot of papers.

Ed didn't like to think about these things, because they marked the end of everything. After the man came there were no more evenings around the fireplace, no more games in the cemetery, no more glimpses of Joe or Susie.

The man made Grandma cry, and talked about incompetence and neglect, and something called a sanity hearing, just because Ed had been dumb enough to tell him about playing in the graveyard, and about Grandma's friends.

"You mean to tell me you got this poor kid so mixed up that he thinks he sees them too?" the man had asked Grandma. "That can't go on, Mrs. Morse; filling a child's head with morbid nonsense about the dead."

"They ain't dead!" snapped Grandma, and Ed had never seen her quite so mad, even though she'd been crying. "Not to me they ain't, and not to him, nor anyone who's friendly. I've lived in this house nigh all my life; ever since Robert was taken from me in that foreign war in the Philippines, and this is about the first time a stranger ever marched into it. What you and your kind would call a living stranger, that is. But the others—they come around regular. Seeing as how we share the same property, so to speak. They ain't dead, Mister; they're just *neighborly,* is all. And to Ed and me they're a darn sight more real than your kind ever was!"

But the man didn't listen to Grandma, even though he stopped asking questions and began treating her nice and polite. Everybody was nice and polite from then on; the other men that came, and the lady who took Ed away on the train to the orphanage in the city.

That was the end. There were no fresh flowers every day at the orphanage, and while Ed met plenty of kids, he never saw anyone like Joe or Susie.

Not that everyone, kids and grownups alike, weren't nice to him. They treated him just so, and Mrs. Ward, the Matron, told him that she wanted Ed to think of her as his own mother—that being the least she could do, after his harrowing experience.

Ed didn't know what she meant by harrowing experience and she wouldn't explain. She wouldn't tell him what had happened to Grandma, either, or why she never came to visit him. In fact, any time he asked any questions about the past she had nothing to say except that it was best to try and forget all that had happened before he came to the orphanage.

Gradually, Ed forgot. In the score of years that followed, he forgot almost completely—that was why it was so hard to remember, now. And Ed wanted to remember, very badly.

DURING the two years in the hospital at Honolulu, Ed spent most of his time trying to remember. There was nothing else for him to do, lying flat on his back that way, and besides, he knew that if he ever got out of there he'd want to go back.

Just before he went into the Service, after getting out of the orphanage, he'd received a letter from Grandma. It was one of the few letters Ed ever received in his lonely lifetime and at first the return address on the envelope and the name, "Mrs. Hannah Morse," had meant nothing to him.

But the letter itself—just a few scrawled and spidery lines written on ruled notebook paper—brought a rush of confused memories.

Grandma had been away, in a "sanotarium," as she put it, but she was back home,

now, and had found out all about the "put-up job they worked to get you into their clutches." And if Ed would like to come back home—

Ed wanted very desperately to come back home. But he was already in uniform and waiting orders when the letter came. He wrote, of course. He wrote all the while he was overseas, and sent her an allotment, besides.

Sometimes Grandma's answers reached him. She was waiting for his leave to come. She was reading the papers. Sam Gates said it was a horrible thing, this war.

Sam Gates—

Ed told himself that he was a grown man now. Sam Gates was a figment of the imagination. But Grandma kept writing about her figments; about Mr. Willis and Mrs. Cassidy, and even some "new friends" who came to the house.

"Lots of fresh flowers these days, Ed boy," Grandma wrote. "Scarcely a day goes by without them blowing taps over yonder. Of course a body isn't so spry any more—I'm pushing seventy-seven, you know, but I still get over for flowers same as always."

The letters stopped coming when Ed got hit. For a long while, everything stopped, for Ed. There was only the bed and the doctors and the nurses and the hypo every three hours and the pain. That was Ed's life—that, and trying to remember.

Once Ed nearly told a skull doctor about the whole deal, but he caught himself in time. It was nothing you could talk about and hope to be understood, and Ed had enough trouble without bucking for a Section Eight.

When he was able to, he wrote again. Nearly two years had passed and the war was long since over. So many things had happened that Ed didn't even dare to hope very much. For Hannah Morse would be "pushing eighty" by now, if—

He got an answer to his letter a few days before his medical discharge came through.

"Dear Ed." The same spidery scrawl, probably a sheet from the same ruled notebook. Nothing had changed. Grandma was still waiting and she'd just known that he hadn't given up. But there was a funny thing she wanted him to know about. Did he remember old Sourpuss, the caretaker? Well, old Sourpuss was hit by a truck last winter, and ever since then he'd taken to dropping in with the rest of them evenings, and now he was friendly as could be, nice as pie. They'd have so much to talk about when Ed came back—

So Ed came back.

AFTER twenty years, after a new lifetime, Ed came back. There was a long month in Honolulu, waiting for sailing—a month filled with unreal people and events. There were nights in a barroom, there was a girl named Peggy and a nurse named Linda, and there was a hospital buddy of Ed's who talked about going into business with the dough they'd saved up.

But the barroom was never as real as the parlor back in Grandma's house, and Peggy and Linda weren't in the least like Susie, and Ed knew he would never go into business.

On the boat, everybody seemed to be talking about Russia and inflation and housing. Ed listened and nodded and tried to remember some of the phrases Sam Gates used to use when he told about Old Abe down in Springfield-Illinois.

Ed took a plane from Frisco, wiring ahead to Mrs. Hannah Morse. He got in at the airport in mid-afternoon, but he couldn't catch a bus for the last forty-mile ride until just before supper. He grabbed a bite to eat at the station and then jolted into town along about twilight.

A cab took him over to Grandma's.

Ed was trembling when he got out in front of the house on the edge of the cemetery. He handed the driver a five and told him to keep the change. Then he stood there until the cab drove away, before he got up enough nerve to knock on the door.

He took a long, deep breath. Then the door opened and he was home. He knew he was home because nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

Grandma was still Grandma. She stood there in the doorway and she was little and wrinkled and beautiful. An old, old woman, peering up at him in the dimness of the firelight, and saying, "Ed, boy—I declare! It is you, isn't it? Land, what tricks a body's

mind can play. I thought I'd still be seeing a little shaver. But come in, boy, come in. Wipe your feet first."

Ed wiped his feet on the mat, same as always, and walked into the parlor. The fire was going in the fireplace and Ed put on another log before he sat down.

"Hard to keep it up, boy," Grandma said. "Woman gets to be my age." She sat down opposite him and smiled.

"You shouldn't be alone like this," Ed told her.

"Alone? But I'm not alone! Don't you remember Mr. Willis and all the others? They sure enough haven't forgotten you, I can tell you that. Hardly talk about another thing except when you were coming back. They'll be over, later."

"Will they?" Ed said, softly, staring into the fire.

"Of course they will. *You* know that, Ed."

"Sure. Only I thought—"

Grandma smiled. "I understand, all right. You've been letting the other folks fool you; the ones who don't know. I met a lot of them up to the sanotarium; they kept me there for nigh ten years before I caught on to how to handle them. Talking about ghosts and spirits and deelusions. Finally I just gave up and allowed they were right and in a little while they let me come home. Guess you went through the same thing, more or less, only right now you don't know what to believe."

"That's right, Grandma," Ed said. "I don't."

"Well, boy, you needn't worry about it. Or about your chest, either."

"My chest? How did you—"

"They sent a letter," Grandma answered. "Maybe it's right, what they said, and maybe its wrong. But it doesn't matter, either way. I know you aren't afraid. You wouldn't have come back if you were afraid, would you, Ed?"

"That's right, Grandma. I figured that even if time was short, I belonged here. Besides, I wanted to know, once and for all, if—"

He was silent, waiting for her to speak. But she merely nodded, face bowed and dim in the shadows. At last she replied.

"You'll find out, soon enough." Her smile flashed up at him, and Ed caught himself remembering a dozen familiar gestures, mannerisms, intonations. Come what may, that was something nobody could take away from him—he was home.

"Land, I wonder what's keeping them?" Grandma said, rising abruptly and crossing over to the side window. "Seems to me they're pretty late."

"Are you sure they're coming?" Ed could have bitten his tongue off a moment after he uttered the question, but it was too late then.

Grandma turned stiffly. "I'm sure," she said. "But maybe I was wrong about you. Maybe you ain't sure."

"Dont be mad, Grandma—"

"I ain't mad! Oh, Ed, have they really fooled you after all? Did you go so far away that you can't even remember?"

"Of course I remember. I remember everything; even about Susie and Joe and the fresh flowers every day, but—"

"The flowers." Grandma looked at him. "Yes, you do remember, and I'm glad. You used to get fresh flowers for me every day, didn't you?"

She glanced at the table. An empty bowl rested on the center.

"Maybe that will help," she said. "If you'd go get some flowers. Now. Before they come."

"Now?"

"Please, Ed."

WITHOUT a word, he walked out into the kitchen and opened the back door. The moon was up, and there was enough light to guide him along the path to the fence. Beyond, the cemetery lay in silver splendor.

Ed didn't feel afraid, he didn't feel strange, he felt nothing at all. He boosted himself over the fence, ignoring the sharp, sudden pain below his ribs. He set his feet upon the gravel path between the headstones and he walked a little ways, letting memory guide him.

Flowers. Fresh flowers. Fresh flowers from fresh graves. It was all wrong, it was Section Eight for sure, but at the same time it was all right. It had to be.

He saw the mound over at the side of the hill, near the end of the fence. Potter's field, but there were flowers on one grave; the single bouquet rested against a wooden marker.

Ed stooped down, scenting the freshness, feeling the damp firmness of the cut stems as he lifted the cluster from the marker. The moon was bright.

The moon was bright, and he read the plain block-letters.

HANNAH MORSE
1870-1949

Hannah Morse was Grandma. The flowers were fresh. The grave wasn't more than a day old—

Ed walked back along the path very slowly. He found it very hard to get back over the fence without dropping the bouquet, but he made it, pain and all. He opened the kitchen door and walked into the parlor where the fire had burned very low.

Grandma wasn't there. Ed put the flowers in the bowl anyway. Grandma wasn't there, and her friends weren't there, either. But Ed didn't worry any more.

She'd be back. And so would Mr. Willis and Mrs. Cassidy and Sam Gates, all of them. In a little while, Ed knew, he might even hear the faint, faraway voices under the kitchen window, calling,

Oh, Ed-*deeee*!"

He might not be able to go out tonight, the way his chest was acting up. But sooner or later, he'd go. Meanwhile, they would be coming, soon.

Ed smiled and leaned back in the chair before the fire, just making himself at home and waiting.

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Dark o' the Moon

BY SEABURY QUINN

A woman of incredible beauty, of monstrous evil. . . .

A HISS like steam escaping from a seething kettle sounded, and Baxter jerked back just in time to miss the vicious stroke of the cottonmouth. Had the reptile not been numbed with the night's chill and torpid with the mice it had gorged at the entrance of the muskrat house it would have been a thought quicker and fleshed its fangs in his hand.

Baxter shivered as he made a detour of the mounded musquash houses, stepping warily about the pools of stagnant water that pock-marked the treacherous surface of the *flottante*. If only he could reach the open water where the pirogue was moored . . . there was a bright moon, that would help, but he must beware of the *congos* and the 'gators—they could pull a man down to sure death in the swamp-water.

For hours—for days, it seemed—he had been struggling across the false-land of the *flottante,* every step an inch above death in the stagnant waters of the *lac,* with death from grasping teeth or poison fangs all round him. A *flottante* is a floating stratum of decayed and rotting vegetation resting on the surface of a backwater that has become blocked with storm debris and on which the jungle has set up outposts. Light-stepping, nimble men can cross its treacher-

Heading by Vincent Napoli

ous surface, skimming from one relatively solid point to the next before the spot beneath them sinks under their weight, but if the traveler breaks through there is no help for him. Baxter felt the water oozing in at his boot top, and took an agile, long step, landing on an earth-encrusted square of almost solid mat, and drew his sleeve across his sweat-streaked face. If he could hold out . . . if the moon kept shining . . .

Three months ago—it seemed a lifetime as he looked back on it—he had been riding from 'Pelier with dispatches from Colonel Cosgrove to General Butler. They'd warned him to be careful when he passed the *chênière*—the ridge of live-oaks growing by marsh. Three couriers had set out for New Orleans after dark in the past week, and none of them had reached headquarters. News of Mumford's hanging had blazed through the bayou country like marsh-fire, and while the city smoldered in a sullen calm beneath the watchful eyes of provost guardsmen open season had been declared for Yankees in the swamplands; every trapper's hut concealed a gun, and men who could bring down a squirrel from the top of a live-oak did not waste a second bullet on lone riders.

He should have left 'Pelier at five o'clock and so reached the city by twilight, but there was a girl at the *'berge*, a black-haired wanton named Solange Dufour who craved pleasure *coute que coute*—at whatever cost. So he had lingered over rum punch and innumerable *vins de murs*—blackberry wine—till the sun dropped like a shot bird in the west and storm-dark dusk lay over everything.

The dirt road wound and crept along the river brim as torpidly as a frost-stiffened snake, and the *flottante* was knee-deep in a gray haze of dank brume when he reached the *chênière;* the live-oaks with their trailing beards of gray-green Spanish moss came right down to the highway, stretching gaunt boughs up to share dark secrets with the darker sky, and with a prescience of disaster Baxter set spurs to his horse and leant down almost to the beast's mane in an effort to present as small a target as possible.

The wind from the slug nearly knocked his kepi off, and almost as he felt the hot draft on his cheek he heard the *spang* of the Spencer. The horse almost leaped out from under him as he drove his spurs into its flanks. He saw the carbine's flash in the deep undergrowth and heard the whip-crack of its report just before he felt the numbing impact of the ball in his left shoulder, felt his arm go dead, and knew he had been hit.

The next thing he remembered he was lying on a pallet and a warm spoon pressed against his lips. The smell of soup was in his nostrils and a soft voice crooned, "Drink it, beautiful young mans, drink it for Doudouce; it will be a *remède* for you. *Mais oui.* But certainly."

The soup was hot and very good, *gombo filé*, made with several kinds of fish and shrimp and crab meat, spiced and thickened with chopped sassafras leaves and piquant with strong wine. He felt his strength returning with each spoonful, and looked about him with that feeling of luxurious laziness that only convalescents know. The woman who knelt by him and supported his head in the bend of her left elbow, was like something seen in a dream from which he had no wish to waken.

Her face was narrow with an arched, thin nose and high cheekbones beneath which delicate hollows showed; her great brown eyes beneath their drooping lids and haughty brows were soft and gentle as a gazelle's; her lips were full and sensuous and darkly red, like the darker kind of strawberries. Her skin, untouched by color, seemed to have been dusted with fine grains of powdered gold and the hair that hung unbound down to her shoulders was the purple-black of a grackle's throat and held a heady perfume of suave spices in its shadowed depths. Great golden crescents dangled in her ears and round her throat was looped a necklace of gold coins, American half eagles, British sovereigns, Spanish dollars, French louis d'ors, even Persian krans and Danish frederiks. Her sole costume was a white-cotton chemise, sleeveless, open to the waist to show a narrow V of golden-tinted skin and the entrancing rondure of her small high breasts, and a petticoat of scarlet woolen stuff extending just below her knees. Her hands were small and slim and very soft, her naked feet most delicately shaped.

"*Bien. Bon.* You feel better now, *hein?*" She sat back upon her heels and eased his

head down to the husk-stuffed pillow. "*Hé*, you were *malade á la morte*, you, when I first found you, me."

He managed to contrive a grin. "Where did you find me, you?" he asked in imitation of her Cajun dialect.

"'*Cré nom!*" she spread her hands and raised her brows and shoulders, "in my *basse cour*—how do you call him?—back yard. You had been shooted in the shoulder and were weak from the lost blood when you came creeping *ventre à terre* like the 'gator to my place. Yes. And afterwards you had the *frisson* and the fever. Oh, I tell you, you were one sick, beautiful young mans, but me, I cured you of your *maladie*, and now"— she said it simply as she might have stated she had bought a pig or calf—now you are mine, *m'ami;* all mine." She bent forward and kissed him.

There was little passion in the embrace, it might have been a mother's or a sister's, but there was a finality about it definite and decisive as a herdsman's putting his brand on an animal.

He learned the story by degrees. The storm that had been threatening when he set out for New Orleans had broken almost at the moment he was shot—one of those explosive deluges when every ditch and gully ran awash at once and the dry, dusty road changed to an overflowing flume. The sniper who had fired at him hugged the wood's shelter, and in the downpour, acting more by instinct than volition, he had crept between the trees and underbrush until he reached the clearing where her cabin stood. The rain that washed his tracks out washed the telltale blood away, so he was safe from pursuit when she heard him whimpering *comme une 'tite chouette*—like a little screech owl—by the hedge of thorn-locust that separated her yard from the jungle.

She had dragged him to the house somehow, though he was *lourdement comme un ours*—heavy like a bear—and cut his tunic and shirt away. His wound was bleeding freely and he was weak from loss of blood, but the bullet had ploughed through the flesh, so she did not have to probe for it, and no bones were broken. She made a pack

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of cobweb and bandaged it on the wound, and fed him tea of coatgrass—*l'herbe cabri*—by the spoonful when the quaking fever came on him. Then a long diet of milk soup and finally the nourishing *gombo*. Now he was all well, almost, and ready for the *pot-au-feu*—the meat boiled with vegetables.

HIS strength returned slowly, and one day he was able to go out to the door-yard and sit in the armchair made of a sawn-out cask and bask in the sunshine. That day she greeted him with a dazzling smile, and coming close to him put both arms around him. He would have been sub-human if he had failed to respond to her embrace, but he was unprepared for her ardor, for as his arms closed around her slight shoulders and drew her to him she pressed her mouth against his so fiercely that it seemed their lips must be bruised. The arms about his neck tightened and she pressed her body against his, rigid as a carven thing, then limp and yielding, the once more rigid, and as she groaned softly with a kind of animal-whimper he could see her half-closed eyes go empty of all sight, like the eyes of a dead woman.

Her cabin was a one-roomed hut, not a flimsy frame hung with palmetto leaves, but made substantially of logs and weather-grayed timbers that had been salvaged from the river's flotsam. Its entrance was closed by a door carved with elaborate arabesques and hung on massive hinges of cast bronze, obviously once part of a "floating palace" river steamboat, and the windows were high-set and small, so at full daylight there was always lodgement for small pools of shadow in the corners. The floor was hard-packed earth and furniture was primitive, a bed constructed of four stakes set upright in the earthen floor with strands of rope and raw-hide lashings stretched between them to support a mattress filled with corn husks, and a chest of drawers, much warped from long exposure to the water, evidently something rescued from the jetsam of a wrecked or burned packet. There was no cellar, but a *magasin* of plastered stones with a sod roof stood in the yard, and in this Doudouce kept her small store of staples: *vin d'orange, vin de murs*—orange and blackberry wine—a few bottles of cognac, some coarse brown sugar and a powder-can of salt. Oranges grew on the backlot, and grapevines clambered over a low trellis. In a clay oven Doudouce baked *croquignoles*—hard, brittle biscuits—and on a grating set above a shallow pit she fried the fish or meat or chicken or boiled the shrimp or crab, or brewed the spicy *gombo* and the hearty *pot-au-feu*.

Life was pleasant, indolent, and utterly without objective. The quiet, lazy days flowed by as sluggishly as the brown river sliding to the Gulf. His blouse had been spoiled when she cut it off to dress his wound, but she made shift to mend his shirt, and when his strength returned enough for him to walk and go with her on fishing trips in her pirogue she made him leave his boots off—"You mus' go *pieds nus, comme moi-même*—barefoot like me—" she told him. "Cajun peoples do not wear the shoes when they can help it."

"But I'm no Cajun," he protested, "I'm—"

"*Foutre, non!*" she laughed. "I say you are a Cajun now; me, I have adopted you!" and she kissed him again, her head flung back, her lips apart. "Now, what you say, *hein?* You do like I say, *non?*"

Her kiss drained him of all resistance. "Yes, yes!" he gasped. "I'm anything you say, Doudouce. I'm—I'm—"

She put her hands up to his cheeks and patted them gently. "You are a very sweet young mans, *m'ami*, an' me, I love you very much. Yes."

She was in his blood like an unconquerable drug, and like a drug she mastered him completely. At any hour, day or night, she could compel him to her will by a soft word or gesture, almost by a look, and while she was consistently gentle, she was insatiable in her demands. She took all, but she gave all. She cooked his food, washed his clothes, she waited on him hand and foot—sometimes even fed him out of hand, taking food from her plate and putting it into his mouth—but she brooked no denial of her wishes, giving orders as one rightfully entitled to obedience, and expecting instant and unquestioning compliance. It pleased her to weave wreaths of orange blossoms for their hair, and when he protested that such things were "sissy" she paid no more heed to his

objections than a mother would to a son's remonstrance against velvet clothes and curls. If he wished to linger in the dooryard after sundown while he smoked a final cheroot she would call him, at first softly, then with an imperious voice, and, sighing, he would toss the half-smoked cigar away and go into the scented darkness of the cabin where soft arms and softer lips awaited him.

She puzzled him. Was she a *femme de couleur?* He had seen white women with far darker complexions, and octoroons in New Orleans with skins far lighter. Still . . . Who were her parents? How did she come there? She appeared well supplied with money. A linen bag in the storehouse was literally filled with gold coins. Could these be from a treasure trove, the buried booty of Lafitte or Pierre Rambeau or Vasseur? How had she come by them? Did she know where more could be found? When he asked her she shook her head and laughed. When he persisted she came close to him and reached up, drawing his face down to hers. Her laughing lips were cool and moist against his hot, dry mouth, and the treasure in his arms wiped out all thought of pirates' buried gold.

Sometimes it seemed to him as if he'd given his soul into her keeping, and somehow this seemed disgraceful; yet why, he asked himself, should he consider it shameful? Except for his extraordinary handsomeness James Baxter was an average young man, thoughtless, funloving, rather superficial. Until it passed from his keeping into hers he'd hardly known he had a soul.

He was afraid of her, too. That time she charmed the snake she'd shaken him to the foundation of his being; put an almost superstitious fear of her into his heart. He was coming from the *magasin* with a jug of *vin d'orange* when a rattler sounded its warning right at his feet. To please Doudouce he had gone barefoot, and the snake lay coiled less than ten inches from his bare ankle. If he moved it would strike, and would surely drive its fangs in him before he could leap to safety. Perhaps it would strike anyway, so he was doomed if he stood still or moved. The fear of death was on him, nausea crawled in his stomach and clamored in his throat. His breathing stopped and paralyzing numbness settled on his limbs. Then suddenly: *"Hé, labas, M'sieu' le Serpent Sonnette! Va t'en toi, oui!*—Hey, Mr. Rattlesnake, get out of here, I tell you!"—came Doudouce's command, and at her voice the poised head lowered and seemed to listen. *"Tendez, toi, va t'en!*—Listen to me, you, get out of here!"

The diamond-shaped, death-freighted head lowered, and the snake slithered away like a reprimanded dog. Baxter breathed again, but with an effort, and turned trembling to Doudouce. "Wh—what are you?" he demanded in an awed voice.

"Hé!" she laughed delightedly and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. *"Je suis tienne au grand jamais*—what should I be but thine forever, my belovèd?" she asked, then added, almost darkly, "And thou are mine the same way."

But that had been only a foretaste, the faintest whiff of brimstone from the bottomless pit on whose brim he had been standing unsuspecting.

Last week three strangers came into the clearing by the cabin, lean, fox-faced men with guns held in the crook of their elbows and grim determination in their bearing. *"Hola, Doudouce Boudreaux,"* called their leader, "we hear you have a *ventrebleu*—a blue-bellied Yankee—in your house."

"En bas!" Doudouce whispered, and for the first time Baxter saw her self-possession falter. . *"Au-dessous de châlit, mon amoureux!*—creep beneath the bed, my lover!"

IT MIGHT have been around midnight, perhaps a little earlier or later, when he wakened to the sound of singing. The moon was round and bright and almost in the center of the sky, but in the cabin it was dark, and when he felt along the coarse rep of the mattress Doudouce was not there, though the place where she had lain was still warm. He went to the high window at the back of the room and looked out.

The orange trees dropped down a shower of petals, but the orange blossoms on the ground and in the air were not whiter than her slim moon-washed body as she knelt and held a clay *bassin* of water up to the white moon. She sang a chant of strange words, words that had been old when Babylonish priestesses invoked the Moon God-

dess Astarte. And as she sang the water in the basin frothed and boiled and then fell still again, and as it quieted she put the dish to her mouth and drank greedily. A drop of water spilled from the dish to the grass, and another, and Baxter saw them fall like silver coins among the orange petals, but the kneeling woman drank and drank, and first a little concave hollow showed in the moon's disc, and then a larger one, until the moon was darkened as if it had been wiped from the sky, and presently from far away there sounded a dog's howl, and then another and another, until it seemed that all the dogs in the world mourned the loss of the bright silver sphere at which they had been wont to bay.

There was no moonlight any more, but by the faint gleam of the stars he saw her fall face-forward on the ground and heard the threshing of her limbs as she clawed at the earth. She rolled and fought and struggled like a thing in its death agonies, then lay still, panting with great, laboring, moaning gasps, and suddenly it was not a woman that he saw, but a cow alligator, eight feet long from snout to tail, and gleaming in the semi-dark of starshine like a thing in armor.

The creature struggled to its feet and slithered toward the hedge of thorn-locust that marked the boundary of the clearing, walking high on its webbed feet, not dragging either tail or belly. In a moment it was gone and Baxter stood alone in the cabin while terror clawed at his spine with icy talons.

He knew he couldn't have seen it. Such things one might read of in books of old and evil magic, but in 1862—the Nineteenth Century . . .!

He felt his way to the storehouse, found a bottle of *vieux cognac,* knocked its top off and drained it. The last thing he remembered as he fell across the bed in drunken coma was his muttered protest, "I didn't see it! It's not so; such things can't be!"

THE sun was up a full two hours when he wakened to a pounding headache and a feeling of malaise. He had a sense the night had been filled with dreams of formless menace, but what he'd dreamed he could not remember. Doudouce he felt

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beside him. She was not there. Then her voice came to him from the dooryard where she baked the morning's *croquignoles*. Doudouce . . singing . . . He came to full consciousness as if swimming up out of deep water. Doudouce in the *orangerie* last night, Doudouce drinking the moon, and afterwards . . .! He walked to the door. She was kneeling at the oven, and the glow from the coals lent a quince color to her cheeks. There was a smile on her face and her small, white, even teeth showed brilliantly behind the redness of her lips. He shook his head as if to clear it of a sediment of dread. Doudouce sweet, gentle little Doudouce . . . he must have dreamed it all. He'd drunk the cognac before he had that vision, not afterwards.

But later in the morning he went to the orange grove and probed among the sparrow-grass and fallen blossoms with his bare foot. There, where Doudouce had knelt and drunk the water silvered by the moonbeams, he found two little discs of argent metal, bright and hard and shining as new-minted coins—and, he remembered with a chill, Doudouce had spilled two drops as she drank.

TONIGHT he had awakened from a vague, fear-haunted dream. Outside the moon was shining brilliantly, but in the cabin it was dark. Dark like a hole. Like a grave. His hand explored the bed beside him. Nothing lay there. He was alone.

Alone. The thought coursed through him like a cold flame. Alone in this dark place, while outside . . . he heard a sound, not like a person walking, but like something sliding, something creeping sinuously toward the open door. The breath came hot and sulphurous in his throat and his heart thrashed and jerked like a gaffed trout. Who—what—was outside?

He got up, crept across the earthen floor and looked out. The yard was white and still and empty in the moonlight, but its very emptiness lent terror to its aspect. Doudouce was she . . .? He walked softly to the angle of the house and looked toward the *orangerie*. It was untenanted.

For the first time he thought of flight. They'd try him for desertion if he went back to New Orleans, maybe hang or shoot him. What of it? Hanging was a felon's death, and shooting a bloody one, but they were men's deaths, after all. Not like being torn and mangled by a monstrous lizzard.

He crept back to the cabin, found his boots and put them on. He'd need them in the underbrush; there might be snakes about. What else? His pistol? He'd been wearing it when he was shot, but she had taken it; he had no idea where it was hidden, and no time to search for it. The thing above all things was to go quickly, before she returned. She might come back in human form, or . . . his brain refused to form the thought; that way certain madness lay.

He stepped across the doorsill, and almost ran into her arms. "So?" She swept him with a quick, stock-taking glance, and her eyes widened as she saw his boots. "So, you fix to run away from Doudouce, *hein?*" Her eyes were dark and hard and bright with bitter anger, yet tears stood in them. "Me, I tell you you cannot do this! I saved you when your blood ran out and you were dying; when those bad mens came for to shoot you I drove them off. You are mine, *mine;* you hear it? I—"

His voice was hard and gritty as he interrupted. "You're a damned witch!" He brought the word out like the flick of a lash.

She recoiled from the epithet as from a blow. Her great eyes widened like a cat's in the dark, seemingly all pupil and devoid of all expression. "*Bête,*" she spit the word like a curse, "*niais-niais, quisquidis*—beast,

ninny, fat-head, pig!" Then with her little, soft hand that had never touched him save in a caress she struck him in the face.

Hot, furious anger flooded through him at the blow. The flame of it raced through his nerves and crashed against his brain. The fear that is akin to hatred and the hatred that is born of fear drove him to frantic, homicidal madness. He seized her by the throat and shook her as a bulldog shakes a cat. Her eyes went wide and wider, starting from their sockets with the force of his throttling, and her mouth opened and her tongue protruded. She fought him futilely with clawing hands and kicking feet, then suddenly went flaccid as a doll from which the sawdust had been spilled, and slumped down to her knees, her body bent back limply and her head as loose upon her neck as if it hung upon a cord. He drove his thumbs into the soft flesh of her throat each side the larynx, gave her a final shake and dropped her as he might have dropped a sack of meal.

Halfway across the clearing he remembered. There was a bag of gold in the *magasin*. It would come in handy if he managed to escape. Why should he go back to New Orleans and be court-martialed? Her pirogue was tied up at the far side of the *flottante*. If he could get to it he'd paddle down the river, traveling by night and tying up by day, until he reached the Gulf. Maybe he could find a ship to carry him to Europe. If he couldn't, he should surely find some sort of hideout. Men with ready money were immune from disconcerting questions. Gold stopped curious mouths and prying eyes. *"Poderoso caballero es Don Dinero."* The Spanish proverb had the right of it. "Mr. Money is a powerful gentleman."

THE moon, a little past the full and shaped like a bent pie-plate, put a veil of magic on the *flottante*, striking back pale flashes from the little open spaces where the pools broke through the treacherous crust, and he could see his way almost as clearly as in daylight as he made for the place where the pirogue was moored. He'd have to be more careful going past the muskrat houses, though; that moccasin had nearly got him . . .

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The eerie, astral silence that accompanies moonlight was broken by a long-drawn, quavering cry, the sound of a dog howling far away. Lonely, quavering and sad as the lament of a lost soul, it wound in a thin wailing coil of sound that spiraled up and up until it lost itself, but in a moment it was answered by another, and another.

The shadows lengthened and the highlights of the landscape began to blur. There was something wrong with the moon. Something crept across its bleached disc, something like a cloud that was no cloud, for it did not obscure, it wiped away the moon-substance as rushing water wipes away a river-bank. A strange, eerie duskiness spread over the *flottante*, and all at once the air seemed heavy, ominous and full of threat.

Baxter licked dry lips with a tongue that had gone stiff. Something that was lurking terror coiled in the depths of his heart, the blood churned in his ears and his breath came hissing noisily between his parted teeth.

She wasn't dead! He hadn't finished her; she'd revived and gone to the *orangerie*; now she drank the moon, and in a moment . . .

He blundered across the *flottante*, and the splashing of his rushing steps in the swamp-water was panic made audible. No time for careful choosing of the way now . . . he had to get to the pirogue, he had to, *had* to . . .

Something scratched against the stiff grass of the *flottante* with a sound like scuttering dry leaves. He dared not turn to look behind him, yet . . . He brought up suddenly. Only half-mindful of the path he chose, he had come to a wide space of open green-scummed water dotted with small islets, all out of jumping distance from each other.

He wheeled to make a detour, and stopped frozen in his tracks. Walking high, tail raised, jaws opened wide, came an eight-foot cow alligator, and for a long, horror-freighted moment he looked into a cavernous white mouth.

"Doudouce," he whimpered pleadingly. "Dou—"

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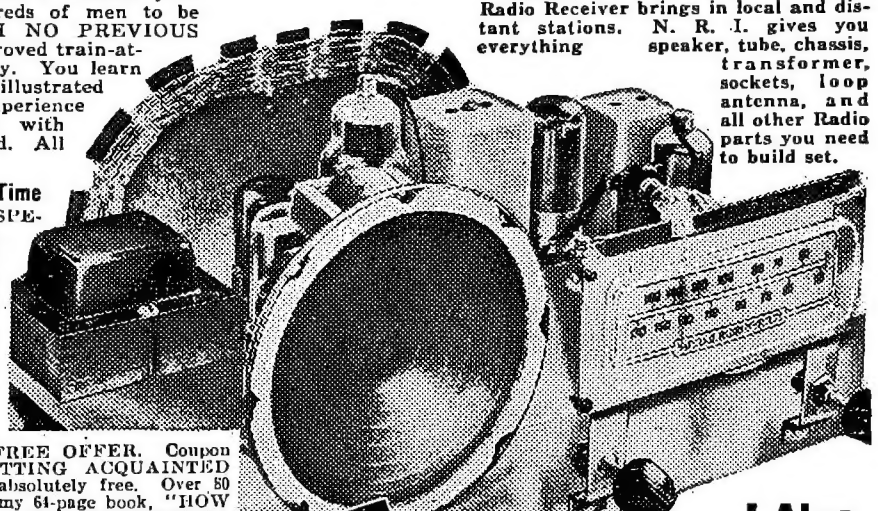

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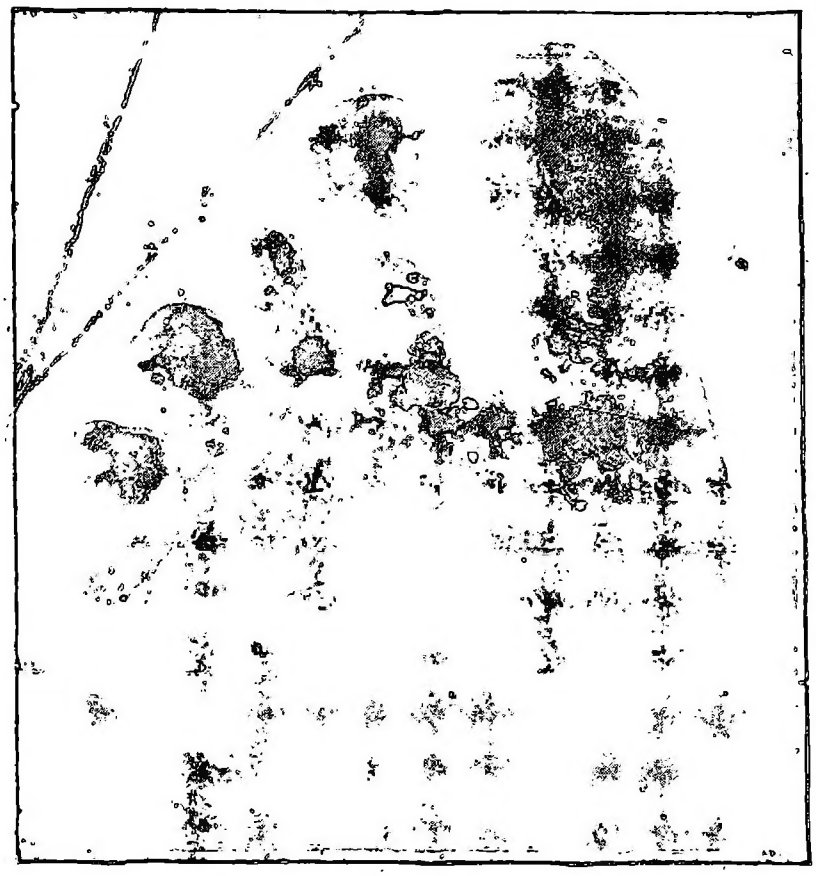

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